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Blacktown – An Australian Frontier

How multicultural life on the urban edge provides a new look at our country

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Introduction

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Rooty Hill High School is a large school of about 1100 students in Blacktown, a local government area in Western Sydney. Christine Cawsey says that when she became principal, in 1997, the student population was "75 per cent Anglo-Celtic, with a large group of Filipino background, some Turkish students, and a small group of Aboriginal students." Eighty per cent of students spoke English at home.

In the years that followed, wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and parts of Africa scattered people from these countries all over the globe. China and India joined the fast lane of the global economy, producing ambitious, mobile middle classes just as a once-in-a-century mining boom drove Australia to undertake a huge expansion of its migration program. Nearly four million people came to Australia in these years, and some of them fetched up at the sleepy Rooty Hill shops.

By day, the change at the shopping strip is not so evident, Cawsey says. "You see a lot of pensioners, a few people on their way to the medical centre, the odd kid truanting from one of the local schools. But go there in the evening, particularly during Ramadan, and it's on. We have Filipino restaurants, one of the best Vietnamese eateries in Western Sydney, halal food, Turkish food, our own fish market. None of this was here even 10 years ago."

Around that time Jas, a former Rooty Hill student, opened her Filipino waffles and coffee shop, Jas My Waffles. Cawsey marked the event in the school newsletter: "Our first ever coffee shop – how cosmopolitan we have become."

Today Rooty Hill has five or six coffee shops, and its high school is also a transformed place. Fewer than half speak only English at home. The school still has large Anglo-Celtic and Filipino populations, and 5 per cent of students are Aboriginal, but now many students are Samoan, Cook Islander and Maori.

There are Indians from India and Indians from Fiji. About 150 students are Muslim, mostly from Northern Iraq, but also from Indonesia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey. There are students from several African countries, and families from Serbia, China, Finland and Greece.

Photo by Christine Cawsey | Christine Cawsey AM (Principle) with Rooty Hill High School students (left to right) Lorrye Genobili, Haris Abawi and Paris Paraan

The names of recent school captains give an idea of the spread: Evan Ademovic, Sussana Zaman, Genoveva-Constantina Stuparu and Jay Lopez.

But merely listing the mix of backgrounds do not capture the diversity and dynamism of the students' lives, even when some of those lives are difficult. Some students are full-time carers of sick parents; others work 30 hours a week, mostly in retail, to support their families. Three girls took a gap year after school to run an orphanage in The Philippines with the help of their local church; others disappeared for three months to attend national celebrations in the Cook Islands. Many students attend local churches and perform community service through them. A group of students and ex-students used school premises to host 200 people, including most of the teaching staff, at an iftar, the feast that breaks the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

Some students struggle with their mental health, some live in extended families with connections to crime and youth gangs, and some face a significant risk from the negative influence of people they know. A very small group of families is connected to organisations that support white supremacy. Yet among the school's more than 50,000 ex-students are elite sportsmen and women, people in senior roles in business, academia and government, and tradespeople who have done well and still live in the local area.

From her desk, Cawsey sees a "powerful, affluent community overall, with patches of real poverty." Each year about a third of Rooty Hill's Year 12 group goes on to university, and the proportion is growing, while many others have gone to TAFE or left at Year 10 to do apprenticeships, often in family businesses. Some families have nearly paid off houses and can take holidays overseas, some single-mother households "live pay cheque to pay cheque" or are homeless. But Cawsey says one thing unites all the parents, whether they are managers, professionals, tradies, truck drivers, nurses or unemployed. "Every family I talk to has aspirations. They all want life to be better for their kids than it was for them."

And that is Cawsey's key point: in terms of its students and families, Rooty Hill is an average school. Seventy per cent of its families are in the bottom two quadrants of the NSW Family Occupation and Education Index. This year, more families are vulnerable to setbacks such as debt, unemployment, even a rent rise. More students are taking jobs to support parents who have lost theirs. More are at risk of getting caught up in the gang-related violence that has gripped Sydney.

"My experience with the young people of Western Sydney is they're pretty resilient, but less so this year — I think that's COVID. We have seen more mental illness this year, more stress, more fragility. Our schools are just a microcosm of what is happening nationally."

Cawsey is proud of her school — which has won several awards and been chosen by Social Ventures Australia as one of eight "powerhouse schools" across NSW and Victoria — for what she calls its "safe, structured environment, with a smart academic program." She is also proud of Blacktown, where she has worked for nearly all her career. "Blacktown is one of the most successful multicultural communities in the country — internationally. What a civilised part of the world it is. Perhaps you want to come and live here?"

Nearly one in six Australians has arrived in the country since Cawsey became principal of Rooty Hill. In no other quarter-century in the nation's history has the population grown so much.

Like most migrants since World War Two, most of the newcomers have moved to Australia's big cities. But unlike those early migrants, few of the latest arrivals have moved into the inner cities, which have become gentrified, increasingly monocultural, and locked up by prohibitive housing prices. Instead, they have had to look to the urban fringe.

As a result, an unprecedented transformation of Australia's population has occurred largely out of sight of policymakers, captains of industry, arts and culture leaders, university academics and journalists. The sites of this transformation have been municipalities such as Dandenong and Wyndham in Melbourne, Fairfield and Liverpool in Sydney, and Logan in Brisbane. This narrative paper for the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute looks at one of these places, Blacktown, and how it is coming together as a community in the face of large-scale immigration and other sweeping changes in recent times.

The paper opens with a portrait of Blacktown: its past, people, politics, and distinct personality. It shows how Sydney's housing and population booms, largely driven by migration, have helped to transform a traditionally working-class community into two cities divided by wealth, education and socio-economic status. It then looks at a range of Blacktown organisations, their leaders, and their role in stitching this community together.

Change driven by immigration has enriched Blacktown, creating a complex, energetic, globalised community that is unrecognisable from the sleepy country town of just 70 years ago. But change has at times been turbulent, occasionally violent.

Many communities around Australia have shared Blacktown's head-on encounter with the forces that are transforming Australia and our world.

Chief among them, apart from migration, are the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity in an advanced, post-industrial economy, and the place of education as the only sure road to the wealth of that economy and a secure life. Only by understanding these forces can we understand the prospects of Blacktown and places like it, and how policy can shape the life chances of people in Rooty Hill, and across Australia.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Part I:

Welcome to Blacktown

City of the plain

Photo by James Button | Faith Edeko

Start with a map and compass in George Street, in the Sydney CBD. Head 30 kilometres west and a little north, upriver.

At Parramatta, strike west for another 10 kilometres, up a hill or two, down another. When you reach the heart of a wide-open plain, nearer to the Blue Mountains than the sea, you're in Blacktown. It's not a journey that many Sydneysiders who live closer to the sea ever make. Which is a shame, because the joke that journalist Joanne Vella remembers being made in the newsroom of The Blacktown Advocate might well be true: "You haven't been to Australia till you've been to Blacktown."

Blacktown is where Governor Macquarie, in 1823, established a Native Institution in order to effect "the civilisation of the Aborigines of NSW," especially their children. It was one of the first public policies "aimed at eliminating Aboriginal cultural traditions and enforcing assimilation with a European way of life," according to the website of the Blacktown Native Institution Project. In time the nearby hamlet was called The Blacks' Town, then Blacktown.

Blacktown was where, in 1955, a Holocaust survivor, Frank Lowy (born Pinchas Levy), opened a delicatessen opposite the station. In her biography of Lowy, Pushing The Limits, journalist Jill Margo tells how he and another Hungarian refugee, John Saunders (born Jeno Schwarcz), would get into a ute every morning, pick up salami in Bondi and bread at the Riga Bakery in Hurstville, then drive to Blacktown. They would pull up at 7.30 to find a crowd of people, most of them migrants, already waiting. But the men soon realised that pickled herrings would never beat property.

They sold the deli, put the profits into land, and opened Australia's first American-style shopping centre around the corner from their old store. In time, their Westfield shopping centres across Australia and the world would make Lowy a billionaire. Telling their story in his column in the early 1960s, Daily Mirror financial editor Richard Dreyfus wrote that "immigrants were the ones who made Australia hum."

[1] How the Westies Won, Griffith Review, July 2013

Blacktown was where Gough Whitlam, in November 1972, launched his campaign to be Prime Minister of the first Labor government in 23 years with the sonorous phrase: "Men and women of Australia." In his speech in Blacktown's Bowman Hall, Whitlam promised to sewer Australia's suburbs. Middle-class people were confused: who didn't have sewerage? But Blacktown people, most of whom still had to make do with a pan service and a night truck, knew what he was talking about.

Blacktown – Rooty Hill, to be precise – was where Julia Gillard camped out for a week in 2013, hoping to revive her embattled prime ministership by reconnecting with a vanishing Labor heartland of "brickies" and "people who set their clocks early." Days before the 2019 federal election, Labor leader Bill Shorten went back to Bowman Hall and gave a speech that tried to channel Whitlam, to no avail.

Liberal leaders such as Tony Abbott and Scott Morrison have also sought to identify an archetypal Western Sydney voter whose sense of aspiration, they say, increasingly aligns more with the Liberals than with the ALP. Politicians argue endlessly over Western Sydney because 2.5 million people – one in 10 Australians – live there. As one of its MPs, Jason Clare, told journalist Kathy Marks: "This is base camp. This is where the new Australia is being made, a cosmopolitan, multicultural Australia."

The biggest in size of the 13 local government areas (LGAs) that make up this vast region is Blacktown. With nearly 400,000 residents, it is also the most populous LGA in New South Wales, and the fourth largest in the country; if it were a discrete city it would be as big as Canberra.

Blacktown residents were born in 188 countries and speak 182 languages, according to its Council website. The largest of these groups are the nearly 26,000 residents born in India and 22,000 in the Philippines. Blacktown also has more people born in South Sudan than does any other Australian LGA, and more people with Pacific Islander ancestry than any other NSW LGA.

In 2015 The Blacktown Advocate identified Blacktown's most common surname as Singh, followed by Smith and Jones, then Kumar. The only large group of recent Australian migrants not substantially represented in Blacktown are the Chinese. Dr Shanthi Robertson, a Western Sydney University sociologist and migration specialist, describes Blacktown's diversity as significantly higher than the state's, and even higher than many other places in Western Sydney, a place that is already "one of the most culturally diverse in Australia, if not the world."

Blacktown also holds Australia's largest urban Indigenous population: more than 10,000 people, and nearly 5 per cent of the population in Mount Druitt, which includes Rooty Hill and is one of three precincts that make up Blacktown City, the name of the LGA.

Indigenous residents comprise the Darug people, whose lands include the Cumberland Plain on which Blacktown stands, and a larger group, made up of Wiradjuri people and others, who migrated from country New South Wales, mostly in the 1960s, and their descendants.

Yet, Blacktown differs in key respects from some other equally diverse parts of Australia. The proportion of its residents born overseas – more than 40 per cent — is higher than the Australian average of 29 per cent, but substantially lower than in LGAs such as Parramatta, Fairfield, or Dandenong, where more than half the population was born overseas.

That's partly because Blacktown has tended not to be a point of arrival for migrants. For example, Filipinos, who began arriving in the 1970s, would often rent a property near the airport in Mascot, then move to a ring of inner and middle western suburbs such as Marrickville, Hurstville and Bankstown, before settling in Blacktown when they could afford to buy a home. Their children and now grandchildren who live in Blacktown are mostly Australian-born.

Blacktown is young. Nearly 44 per cent of its people are aged under 30, as a visit to the station or nearby Main Street at about 4pm on a weekday reveals.

By day, the street is a kaleidoscope of two-dollar shops, pawnbrokers, Indigenous buskers, fortune tellers, astrologers, corner spruikers of end times, and Filipino takeaways with whole-cooked fish sitting, teeth bared, in the bain-marie. Josie's Divine Beauty & Fashion promises "All African Products, Braids, Dreadlocks, Weaves," while Desi Cutz, a "Gents Barber", shaves the sides of heads, with geometric patterns inlaid on request, all the better to show off the thick black crowns of young Indian and Islander men. The corner grocery store is a cornucopia of yams, chokos, chickpeas, nuts, spices and fifty varieties of rice. An outdoor shelf is heaped with doormats, detergent and a dozen used DVDs, including The Jane Austen Book Club -- and atop the whole teetering pile is an electric bike, sale price $700. On a bench near the store sit older Sudanese women in long skirts and flat sandals, Chinese canvas bags by their sides, quietly waiting.

But once school's out, the students stream in. They come in all sizes and cultural backgrounds but in two primary colours: the royal blue of Catholic schools Patrician Brothers and Nagle Colleges, and the maroon of Blacktown Boys and Blacktown Girls High Schools. Between 60 and 87 per cent of students at these four schools, all located near the Blacktown CBD, come from families that speak a language other than English at home.

Lugging bags, they walk straight past the two-dollar shops and meet and merge near the ramp that funnels them into that citadel of capitalism, Westpoint mall. Here they browse, flirt, shop, sometimes scuffle, and fidget with their phones. Other young people polish surfaces and push brooms in red Westpoint t-shirts that say Cleaning and Social Distancing Ambassador. The mall is shiny, characterless, and churns out a lot of plastic, but it is also where a lot of Blacktown life happens.

After dark, the streets empty. Blacktown has no street or precinct that tourists visit to experience multiculturalism, no match for Freedom Plaza in Cabramatta or the Indian district of Parramatta's Harris Park. Hardly anyone drives into Blacktown on a Friday night to dine, when the options are the eateries on the fourth floor of Westpoint mall, the kebab shop on Main Street, or the Blacktown Workers Club's Impressions Cafe, which offers "pub grub with a burger or grill, or perhaps a meal bursting with Asian flavour." Kristine Aquino, lecturer in global studies at the University of Technology Sydney, defines Blacktown as the heart of "suburban multiculturalism… It is seen as a boring place with a lot of migrants that no one really cares about, but in fact, it's where the real, lived multiculturalism happens. People are up against difference every day. They learn to negotiate it and live with it, far more than the cosmopolitan elite."

Along with a big part of Western Sydney, Blacktown is much more religious than the rest of the city. Nearly a third of its residents identify as Catholic, and the suburb of Blacktown (part of the larger LGA), has more Catholics than any other in Sydney. Blacktown City also has significantly more Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Pentecostals than the rest of Sydney. Just 15 per cent of residents say they have no religion. In contrast, in the City of Sydney, home of big corporations and harbourside suburbs – the cosmopolitan elite – 44 per cent say they are not religious.

Monsignor Ron McFarlane, parish priest at St Andrew the Apostle in the Blacktown suburb of Marayong since 1988, says he can name eight thriving Catholic parishes within a 10-minute drive of his church. The reason is immigration. "Maltese, Filippino, Indian, Sri Lankans, other nationalities – they come to Mass as families," he says. "We would not have such an active and involved church if it were not for the multicultural people." McFarlane says that before COVID-19, between 2000 and 2400 parishioners came to his church over four weekend services; but "if it were just the Anglos it would be 300 to 400." He adds: "You are living in a society where religion has become irrelevant. But definitely not in Blacktown."

That group McFarlane cites, the 50 per cent of all residents who claim Australian, British or Irish ancestry, is also central to the Blacktown story. They are often older, and many came to Blacktown in the decades after

the war, as families went west from Sydney's inner suburbs in search of a roomy block. They, too, shared the Blacktown experience of living on the urban frontier, of starting afresh.

The point is that nearly everyone in Blacktown, apart from the Darug, is in one way or another a migrant.

The mayor, Tony Bleasdale, a genial, hard-working Liverpudlian with a gift for a story, migrated alone to Australia as a 15-year old in 1962 -- though not, he says, before hearing The Beatles play at The Cavern and being roared at by Gerry from Gerry and the Pacemakers for trying to sell him an underweight packet of shrimps and cockles in a pub. In Sydney, a Greek girl in a shop took pity on the hungry immigrant and gave him a free pie, then charged him full whack when he tried to get another one.

Bleasdale and the girl, Nina, got married and remain so today. He worked as a bricklayer and an industrial relations fixer for his union before he made a pile running a building contracting business – a typical Blacktown story.

Ed Husic and Michelle Rowland, the two federal MPs whose seats cover most of Blacktown City, have Bosnian Muslim parents and a Fijian mother respectively, and both grew up in Blacktown. The father of the state MP for Blacktown, Stephen Bali, was a refugee from Hungary. The family of the Council's CEO, Kerry Robinson, left inner Sydney for Blacktown to run a chicken farm – not with great success; Robinson's father had to go back to his carpenter's trade one year to ensure his children had school shoes, "not that we ever noticed," Robinson says.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Tony Bleasdale

Blacktown versus the world

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Among the 36 famous Blacktown people listed on Wikipedia -including its most famous export, Toni Colette - are 22 rugby league and union players.

Tommy Raudonikis, one of Australia's finest league players of the 1960s and '70s, lived in a two-bedroom fibro house in Blacktown. When his coach, Roy Masters, saw the house and others like it, he spun a tale of rugby as class war and used it to fire up his players whenever Western Sydney Rugby League club played Manly, its rivals on the toffy North Shore. Masters called it "The Fibros versus the Silvertails."

That fighting stance – Blacktown versus the world — persists today. The Council's 2020 Social Profile records seven common dislikes about living in Blacktown: all concern a perception that outsiders "look down" on it or see it as "a bit rough." In 2015, Stephen Bali, Blacktown's then mayor and now state MP, was so incensed by the portrayal of Mount Druitt residents in the SBS documentary, Struggle Street — "poverty porn," he called it – that he sent a convoy of Blacktown garbage trucks to blockade SBS offices on the North Shore, making sure to call other TV stations before he did so.

Locals will also say, often with indignation, that media obsession with crime has fed a distorted image of Blacktown. The LGA does have a serious issue with domestic violence, notably in Mount Druitt, and in the Indian community and some others. Domestic violence is responsible for 40 per cent of police call-outs in Blacktown. Yet while overall crime levels are certainly higher in Blacktown than in the rest of Sydney, in general they have fallen over recent years, in line with state trends.

Older people's perceptions may be shaped by the 1986 murder of Blacktown nurse, Anita Cobby, one of Australia's most hideous crimes. Yet as Blacktown's chief inspector of police, Bob Fitzgerald, told a Harmony Day lunch this year, in Western Sydney "998 in every thousand is a decent person who is trying to make the best for themselves." In a Westpoint café, Peter Filmer, events manager at Blacktown Council and a former NRL referee, thumps the table: "I grew up here. I was the first person in my family to go to university – thanks Gough for the free education.

I turned out alright, a family man with three grown children, all gainfully

employed. Am I the exception to the rule? No! I'm the rule!"

Filmer will also tell you that Blacktown does not get a fair go from government. Unlike Parramatta, it has never been a centre of government, or headquarters of any big or even medium-sized business. It has no medical institute, comprehensive hospital or leading arts facility, even though Blacktown residents pay for such plums through their taxes like everyone else. "The inner city of Sydney steals money from Blacktown taxpayers to gorge themselves on culture, publicly funded,'' wrote David Borger, a former state minister and now Western Sydney Director of the Sydney Business Chamber, in 2013. Despite its success in spawning footballers, Blacktown has no NRL club; instead, it is wedged between the Penrith Panthers and the Parramatta Eels. Kerry Robinson may have a point when he says: "Part of that collective chip on a westie's shoulder is about ingrained inequality that other people just accept."

In recent decades, governments have tried to address historic neglect of Western Sydney by investing heavily in infrastructure in Parramatta and Penrith. Liverpool stands to benefit greatly from a second Sydney airport at nearby Badgery's Creek. But what did Sydney's largest LGA get? In 2018 the Federal and State Governments announced a new Western Sydney City Deal to develop the region in partnership with eight Western Sydney councils – and left Blacktown out.

Christopher Brown, chairman of the Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue, is one of a number of people who say Blacktown Council did itself no favours with its long and loud opposition to the second airport. Nevertheless, he says, "Blacktown needs attention. It has been badly neglected by government." A failure to invest in Blacktown means "it's had not enough poets and scientists, and a shitload of footy players."

In fact, Blacktown does have poets. There is the performance poet, John Lusunzi, who is active at the Blacktown Youth Services Association, and who told me that "in some ways there is less exclusion in Blacktown because everyone has been excluded."

Most famously, there are the globally recognised drill rappers, Onefour, three of whose five members are writing their poetry in gaol. All three were convicted of grievous bodily harm related to gang violence. Onefour members are Samoan-Australians, straight out of Mount Druitt, who grew up together in the pews of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, also known as the Mormons, then went to war in words and music against the police and the white Australia of Home and Away. Writing in The Monthly, journalist Mahmood Fazal said the rappers,

with their “performative masculinity,” had “given a voice to hundreds of thousands of marginalised young Australians who are seeing their dress codes, neighbourhoods and slang represented for the first time.”

Onefour embodies a local solidarity that is powerful in Blacktown, even as the city has morphed from a largely white Anglo-Celtic past into a multicultural present. Over coffee at Westpoint mall, 31-year old film maker and actor Vonne Patiag, whose parents migrated from the Philippines in the 1980s, talks of his deep loyalty to Blacktown.

“I remember the 90s, every Thursday late night shopping at Westpoint, Filipinos everywhere,” he says. “Your Mum would stop and talk every two steps. Most worked at the hospital, they all knew each other. It was my nightmare!”

“You do see a lot of crime reports in the news: someone got knifed, a girl got kidnapped at Dawson Mall in Mount Druitt,” Patiag says. “It can look rough, and be kind of wild. But I feel this innate safety here. No one is above anyone else. I can sit with someone who is white and feel a commonality. We both know where we stand. I did not encounter racism until I left Blacktown.”

When Patiag studied and worked in Sydney’s affluent inner city, he met a sense of superiority that he felt tipped into racism: jokes about bags from Target as “Vietnamese Louis Vuitton's”; a casting agent who said she could use him only in a film on the Bali bombings, and even then only as a terrorist or a victim. “I remember at the age of 15 thinking, ‘Is this a good conversation?’”

Last year Patiag moved back to Blacktown in order to make his art out of Western Sydney life. His co-written work includes an ABC comedy, Halal Gurls, and The Unusual Suspects, the story of a heist of a $16 million necklace that screened on SBS this year and was described by local newspaper Philippine Times as “the first major representation of Filipino Australians on Australian television.” His short film, Tomgirl, brings the tradition of bakla, men who dress as women and are respected in Filipino society, to the streets of Blacktown.

Patiag says he is happy to be home. “Even though new communities have come in, Blacktown has stayed the same. I feel like this area is built on the idea of a melting pot, a place where you can be yourself.”

Perhaps the biggest sign of Blacktown’s underdog pride lies in the almost mythical journey of its name. For Aboriginal people, it marks a place of sorrow, of being severed from their ancient life.

In these times of statue-toppling and cancel culture, of renaming places and recasting the past in light of present values, the name of Blacktown might have been considered a candidate for the chop. Far from it.

As early as 1929, a local paper reported on discussions at the Shire Council about the need for a name change. In 2015, Liberal Party members of Blacktown Council campaigned to change the name to Western Sydney. Councillor Jess Diaz told The Guardian that Blacktown should be "a modern metropolis which people will embrace, aspirational people. The branding of Blacktown is a negative for many developers. I think we should try and give the city a positive name."

Darug leaders fiercely objected. They liked the name and the link with their history, however tragic, and it turned out that the people of Blacktown agreed. In a Council survey of more than 3000 residents, 80 per cent voted against changing the name.

Which was fine by James Munroe, a New Zealand citizen of Maori descent who lives in Blacktown. When I ask Munroe, who is vice chairman of the NSW Council for Pacific Communities, what he most likes about his home, he replies: "The name, for a start. Whenever I get up and talk, I'm always proud to say, 'I'm from Blacktown.'"

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

A tale of two cities

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

But the place of which Munroe is so proud is changing. “Our city is deeply divided by socio economic status,” says the Council’s 2020 Social Profile.

But the place of which Munroe is so proud is changing. “Our city is deeply divided by One word status,” says the Council’s 2020 Social Profile.

Blacktown’s south and west – especially the 11 suburbs of Mount Druitt – hold some of the poorest urban areas of Australia. The LGA lies within what academic researcher Ian Watson, in a 2018 report, Jobs for the West, called “a belt of disadvantage” that runs through Western Sydney to Campbelltown.

But Blacktown’s northern suburbs, including Riverstone, Marsden Park, Schofields and The Ponds, contain the greenfield developments of the North West Growth Area. They are on Sydney’s edge, but they are a centre of its housing boom.

Here, gleaming two-storey homes with two-car garages rise on streets with aquatically-themed names such as Sail, Paddle, Jetty and Everglades, with Perfection Avenue around the bend. Amy Lawton, a social researcher with Western Sydney Regional Information and Research Service, lives in The Ponds and jokes with her family that her 10-year-old Mazda battles to keep up with the parade of Mercedes Benzes, Audis, Range Rovers, Porsches and Ferraris.

While Blacktown’s overall median house price is $750,000, well below the $1 million average in Greater Sydney, in The Ponds one house fetched $2 million in 2016. The ABS has ranked The Ponds as one of Sydney’s most affluent suburbs.

After the Australian-born, who are coming to this area in large numbers, Indians comprise the biggest group in The Ponds. These migrants are not the working-class Europeans of earlier times; they are typically professionals, managers, and specialist technicians, most arrived in the last 10 years, and the biggest cohort is aged between 25 and 29. They are often travelling long distances to work, facing high mortgage repayments, and pushing for visas for elderly parents to migrate and look after the children. Such prosperous but pressured families are the new face of Blacktown.

Kerry Robinson describes Blacktown’s postwar history as a tale of newcomers building villages along the railway lines west and north. “The housing was cheaper, working-class; it attracted people who don’t have lots of money.

Filipinos, for example, are health workers and carers, lower-paid parts of our society. But in the new release areas, try and find a three-bedroom house on 300 square metres for less than $800,000 and you can't do it. That's not housing affordable to cleaners or nurses. The nature and culture of our city is changing."

The biggest change is in numbers. The new housing in the North West Growth Area explains why Blacktown's population grew by 2.5 per cent a year between 2007 and 2019, compared to 1.6 per cent across Australia. On pre-COVID figures, Blacktown's population is projected to grow by another 157,000 people by 2036. These are huge numbers and they are provoking a response.

A 2020 Council survey of residents' feelings about living in Blacktown showed that residents of the two poorer precincts – Blacktown and Mount Druitt -- expressed a relatively strong sense of belonging. But when residents of the newer, wealthier North West Precinct were asked whether they felt they belonged, nearly one in three disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Moreover, total satisfaction with living in Blacktown has fallen since 2016. The survey suggests that the impacts of development and congestion are largely to blame. Residents see public transport as inaccessible or unreliable; they make three-quarters of all trips by car.

The things they like least about living in the LGA are "traffic and dangerous driving."

Yet population growth has brought economic gains. It helps to explain why Blacktown and Western Sydney have not followed the path of similar regions in the United States and the United Kingdom. In 2016, Britons voted to leave the European Union and Americans voted for Donald Trump. These historic shifts were attributed in large part to working-class voters, most of them white, feeling that their societies had left them behind. But that is not the Western Sydney story, says Professor Peter Shergold, Chancellor of Western Sydney University.

Shergold recounts a conversation he has had often in the United Kingdom. When he describes his university as being based in a heavily migrant area that was once a manufacturing hub, his listeners assume that it must be in deep decline, like much of the north of England. Quite the opposite, Shergold replies.

"Western Sydney is simply not the story you expect if your understanding of how longstanding areas of migration and manufacturing have fared is based on the United States or Britain," he says. "It should be our Rust Belt. Instead, it's booming."

Shergold's thinking draws directly on Where are the Jobs?, a paper published last year by Professor Phillip O'Neill, an economic geographer at Western Sydney University. In 2019, when O'Neill came to update previous work on the long-term decline of manufacturing jobs in Western Sydney, he was astonished to find that far from being in decline, the region over the past decade had experienced the greatest jobs boom since the time after World War Two. While manufacturing continued to shed jobs over the long term, there had been huge jobs growth in construction, followed by transport and logistics, health and other care sectors, and retail. The big driver of that growth was immigration.

O'Neill uncovered another extraordinary feature of the contemporary Western Sydney population – an explosion in the number of degree holders, above all in Blacktown. In 1971, a mere 539 out of its 134,000 residents – 0.4 per cent — held tertiary degrees. By 2016, that number had risen to nearly 17 per cent: 57,000 in a population of 336,000. Again, immigration was central to the change.

Migration has shaped Blacktown's population composition, age mix, religiousness, economic strength and opportunity, levels of inequality, and very identity. How will it shape Blacktown's future? To get a glimpse of the answer, we need to look at Blacktown's past.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Land, lots of land, under western skies:

Blacktown then and now

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

In the years immediately after World War Two, Blacktown was a tiny country town, not much more than a railway station surrounded by orchards, piggeries, chicken farms, and cattle fields – Sydney's food bowl.

For children growing up in the 1950s, it "was still a place of dairy herds, bushland, and winding creeks to follow, full of frogs, yabbies and maidenhair ferns…a child's paradise," wrote local historian Les Tod in a 2014 paper. But as historian Keith Hancock wrote in his classic work of 1930, Australia, "the dominant theme in Australian political history is the lament of an unsatisfied land hunger." In the 1950s this hunger descended on Blacktown.

The timber cutters who felled the last great stands of Cumberland Plain eucalypts gave way to bulldozer drivers, road layers, railway linesmen. Creeks were concreted, bird song hushed by the hum of machines. Men flattened paddocks, then other men raised walls and built homes – Western Sydney's famous three-bedroom fibro, asbestos-reinforced cement cladding affixed to a timber frame. As wealth grew and road replaced rail, engineers carved vast concrete corridors, two- then four- then six-lane highways, out of the shrinking bush. The CBD of Blacktown was engulfed by suburban sprawl, its historic buildings demolished for shiny shopping centres, Westpoint and K-Mart. The palm trees by the bus station were knocked down and taken to the tip; people protested, they were replanted, they died.

Today, technology continues to advance, wealth grows. Cars get faster, traffic slower. On the city's north-west fringe bulldozers grind towards the Blue Mountains and huge houses go up with yards too small for trees, even as Blacktown stands at the heart of Sydney's hot zone, with the mercury in neighbouring Penrith recording 48.9C in January 2020, making it for a day the hottest place on Earth. All this upheaval is noted truly, if drily, on the Council website: "A land use conflict exists between the need for urban expansion and the preservation of remnant native bush."

Yet what hurts the land can bring hope to people. Sitting together at the Odeon Picture Theatre in Manchester in 1959, Mary Walsh and Jim O'Neill stared at a pre-movie newsreel encouraging people to migrate to Australia. The newsreel showed washing flapping on a Hill's Hoist in

a backyard in the sun. For Mary, born "poverty-stricken" in Ireland, that image was enough, says her daughter, Deborah. "It promised Mum a bigger, better life than the one she had."

Mary and Jim, now married, arrived in Rooty Hill in 1960, rented a caravan in the backyard of friends, then moved to a three-bedroom fibro house in Blacktown. Within five years, they owned their own home, an impossible dream if they had stayed in Britain. Both parents worked in factories, until Jim was able to buy an earthmover and start a construction business.

The family held its culture close — Jim went hurling and Deborah was Irish dancing in a green dress with a white ribbon at the age of four — but she soon became aware of other cultures in her midst: Dutch, Hungarians, the Greek milk bar owners on the other side of the railway tracks, and Bob Bingley, "a quintessential Aussie guy who worked for my dad, whose name I loved." At the house of her friend, Isabella Galea, Deborah watched "gobsmacked" as Mrs Galea fed something called spaghetti into a pot of boiling water. "It was meat and three veggies at our place, with fish fingers thrown in for a bit of variety." O'Neill, who became a teacher in Catholic schools and is now a Labor Senator for NSW, remembers a "sense of neighbours and neighbourliness in Blacktown."

After the first waves of British and Irish migrants came Italians, Yugoslavs, Hungarians, and Poles. Maltese came in big numbers to work in Blacktown's market gardens. Other workers, who at that time were mostly men, drove trucks or hauled bricks, but most jobs were in small factories that sprang up on the city's edge to make cement pipes, cotton thread, television towers, quality men's wear. The economic pattern differed from that of Melbourne or Adelaide: there were no industrial giants, no Ford or Holden plants, yet the move of manufacturing from inner to outer suburbs was the same. Jobs followed people, people followed jobs, and all went looking for land.

Whether or not they experienced prejudice, the migrant workers of that time joined unions and earnt the same award wages as the locals. A rough equality was forged in the rows of three-bedroom fibros on roomy blocks, Saturdays spent washing the mud out of children's sports clothes or hammering down a sheet of cladding on the porch.

Jade Cadelina, who was nine when his family migrated from the Philippines in 1977, remembers being called "slopehead" and "chinky-eyed Chinese," but he remembers kindness, too. At his first primary school, a blond boy threw a random punch at him, but two girls, also blond, stood up for him and called a nun, who made the boy apologise.

His father and mother quickly found jobs, working respectively on the railways and as a nurse. In a typical Filipino pattern, they rented houses in three inner western suburbs before moving in 1978 to a home of their own, in Quakers Hill. Today the Blacktown suburb is well inside the

urban perimeter but at that time it was on the edge. “It was smelly, because of the cows and the chicken farms,” Cadelina says. His neighbours, a Maltese family, had an acre of land, on which they ran sheep, chickens and an emu. At night, the boy could smell and hear the train puffing “like the Orient Express” towards Richmond – a diesel, because at that time the line was not electrified after 6pm. “And the sky was so clear, you could see so many stars.” Cadelina laughs: “I’m a Catholic. I’m always looking up.”

Looking up paid off, because in time, he met a Filipino-born woman, Norian, at his church, asked her to join his church choir, and married her. He became an IT specialist, she worked in superannuation; they had two children, now in their 20s, and they still live in Blacktown, not far from where Cadelina grew up.

Cheap land enabled the Ahmadis, a branch of Islam centred in Pakistan, to build their huge Baitul Huda mosque in Marsden Park in the 1980s. Cheap land also spurred the NSW government to build a prison in Parklea, in the face of fierce local protest.

Land – the room to breathe and spread out -- has helped the area’s many communities to get along, says federal MP Ed Husic, whose seat of Chifley roughly covers half of Blacktown. And land still drives the search for wealth, as Michelle Rowland, whose seat of Greenway is next to Husic’s, noticed during the 2019 federal election campaign.

“I was not concerned about franking credits, but what hurt me was negative gearing,” Rowland says. “I had so many people of sub-continental background come up to me on the booths and say, ‘I normally vote for you Michelle but not this time.’ Why not? ‘Because Labor doesn’t want me to make money on property.’ You try to explain this really complex policy but you’ve got 30 seconds before someone takes the how-to-vote card and goes in.”

Rowland sees the same drive in all her constituents, whether they arrived last century or last week. “They want to move into a nice new house and furnish it, and go on holiday now and then. They want to make money and make sure their kids can get an education and make money, too. Everybody is concerned with one thing and one thing only – it’s the whole quality of life.”

[2] Blacktown CBD: An Historical Perspective, 1860-2014, Les Tod, 2014.

Land and the Blacktown economy

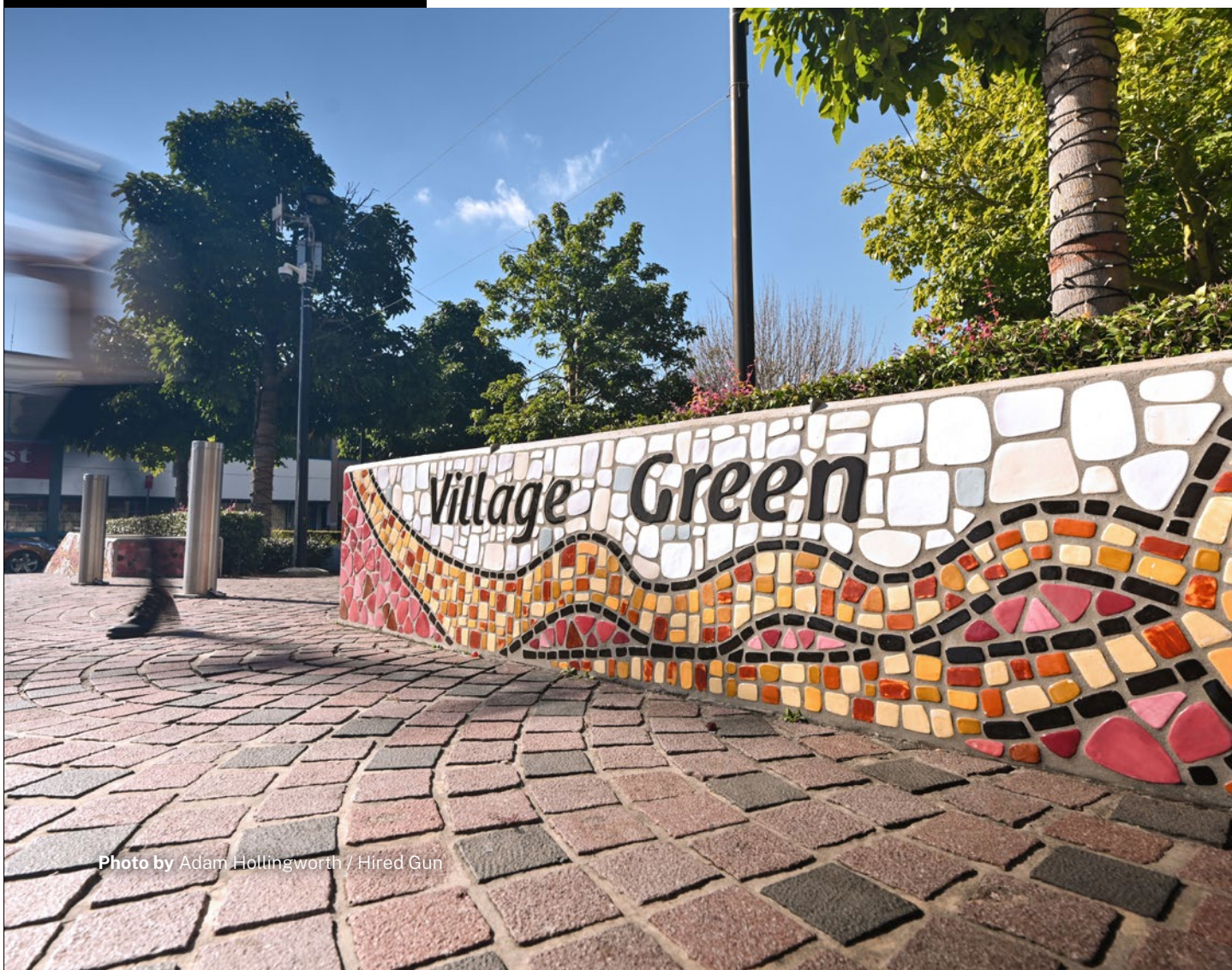

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

The value of land to Blacktown can be seen in its economic output, which in the 2019-2020 financial year came from just three industries: construction; transport, postal and warehousing; and manufacturing, according to research by the University of Western Sydney economic geographer Phillip O'Neill. One in eight Blacktown employees work in construction.

Population growth also explains why the health, social assistance and retail sectors are also big employers, particularly of women.

As Blacktown's population continues to grow, the State Government lets out a few more notches in the mortgage belt and rezones more land as residential in the North West Growth Area. The Council zones land to create business parks to attract big warehouses and corporate centres for the likes of Aldi, IKEA, Costco and Toll. "Our economy has changed. We effectively unpack boxes from China, and you need great big sheds by the motorway to do that," says Council CEO Kerry Robinson.

But can Blacktown – and Australia – continue to build an urban economy based heavily on finding people to fill land through immigration? Phillip O'Neill analysed the Western Sydney and Blacktown economies in two papers written in 2020 and 2021.

O'Neill found that the jobs boom of the pre-COVID decade, driven by construction, infrastructure spending and immigration, should have delivered widespread prosperity. Instead, he writes, it has failed to address the deep-seated labour market problems of Western Sydney: "namely: above-average unemployment, chronic youth disengagement and low labour force participation rates among women."

Then, in 2019, the jobs surge faltered. Construction, always a boom-bust industry, suffered a significant downturn. And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the sharp halt to international travel. In the 2020-2021 financial year, Australia's net immigration will fall to zero, with no sign yet of when it might rebound.

By December 2020, Blacktown's unemployment rate had risen to 7.5 per cent. While that is not dramatically higher than the national rate of 6.6 per cent, youth unemployment has jumped to 17.4 per cent, compared

to 13.9 per cent across Sydney."
The lesson of the past decade, says O'Neill, is that only government can initiate the comprehensive package of reforms, especially to education and training, needed to reduce entrenched disadvantage in places like Blacktown.

"Over the past 10 years, we let the private sector go gangbusters and we didn't get a solution to our most serious job problems. At the moment I think it's got nothing more to offer." O'Neill fears that without a concerted plan, Western Sydney's future might be "a frustrating repeat of long commutes, car dependency, disillusioned youth, and protracted joblessness in the same old places."

People on Blacktown Council have begun to think about what that plan might be. Since Blacktown's land runs out in 20 to 30 years, it will need to consider other strategies for growing its economy and job opportunities for its people.

Which explains why, on March 12, 2021, a large crowd gathered on the ground floor of a former office block on Blacktown's Main Street, between Manila Food Filippino Home Cooking and the Quac Hoa Hot Bread shop.

[3] *Where are the Jobs?* (2020) and *Future Directions: Ways Forward for the Economies of Blacktown, Cumberland, Parramatta and The Hills* (2021), the latter paper co-written with Dr Kathy Tannous of the Western Sydney University Business School.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

A university for blue-collar Blacktown

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Excluded from the rush of recent big development projects in Western Sydney, the Council worked single-mindedly for seven years to attract a university to Blacktown. Eventually, Council settled on the Australian Catholic University (ACU).

On March 12, before a large audience, Bishop Vincent Long of Parramatta opened and blessed the new campus, ACU's eighth across Australia. The bishop noted that it was named after Saint Josephine Bakhita, patron saint of Sudan and of victims of slavery and human trafficking. Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge twice called Blacktown Bankstown in his speech before he hit his stride, describing education as the essence of hope.

The Sudanese Catholic Choir drummed and swayed and sang, and Darug elder Aunty Julie Jones expressed her own hope that more First Nations students would cross this door and help to "lift their communities higher than where we are today." During the celebration, Bishop Long looked at the Mayor, Tony Bleasdale, and saw tears in his eyes.

In his speech, Bleasdale repeated the statistics he knows by heart: Western Sydney has half of Sydney's population, more than a third of its tertiary students, but just 18 per cent of its university places. As a result, 18,000 tertiary students leave Blacktown to study each day, sometimes travelling long distances. Now some of these young people could come home. "It's a game-changer for Blacktown," Bleasdale said.

The new campus is a big step for ACU, too. Its former vice-chancellor, Greg Craven, who presided over the project before retiring at the end of 2020, remembers hearing Pope Francis give an off-the-cuff speech at a conference of Catholic educators in 2018, with vice-chancellors from around the world sitting in the front row. "He said to us: 'I know how clever, wise and rich you all are. I know how wonderful your campuses are. You all live in beautiful suburbs and have the best students. Why are you not with the poor?' At 2am I was writing down the Pope's speech. We'd already been thinking about this (creating an ACU campus in Western Sydney) but his speech was a huge factor in our thinking."

Craven sees Blacktown as "a community hungry for education." Focus groups made it "very clear to us that the local population was desperate to have a tertiary faculty in their midst." He thinks the university will draw students from three partially overlapping groups: low-income people, people of non-English speaking background, and people who are "perfectly well off but have no books in the house -- families where no one has ever thought about going to university. It will be like, 'We always thought that Toula was going to be a hospital cleaner but now she's going to be a nurse.'" Craven thinks the university "will totally alter the whole conception of Blacktown."

Many of the first group of 470 students, just under a third of whom come from Blacktown City, are taking nursing and teaching courses, others are studying allied health, exercise and sports science, business, theology and law. Numbers are projected to go past 1000, and as they grow, the university will share space with the Council at a new development in nearby Warrick Lane. For example, a student moot court might occupy Council chambers when they are empty. Students will want to live close to campus, so the Council has ringed the CBD with zones for apartment buildings of five to eight storeys. A range of new business opportunities in the CBD could emerge.

The new campus will by no means guarantee Blacktown's future. It is small, and Blacktown will need many more big projects to create jobs and opportunities for its people. But the new campus gives people such as Faith Edeko, a 17-year old nursing student, the opportunity to build a whole life close to home.

When I spoke to Faith, soon after the university year had begun, she said she felt "a lot of excitement" about studying at ACU and in Blacktown. She was planning to sign up for the university's student committee. Her new friend, Abby, whom she met at an orientation party, lived close to her and was driving her on some days to university. In May there would be a cruise for students on Sydney Harbour. "Most of the tickets were gone but I got one. I can't wait."

Faith, who was born in Australia, said her parents had migrated from Nigeria expressly to provide an education and a good life for their seven daughters. The family moved to Blacktown when she was a young girl, and she quickly grew to love the place. At Tyndale Christian School, her friends were "Samoan, South Sudanese, Filipino, Chinese, Nigerian like me." After school she and two sisters would go to the Max Webber Library in the Blacktown CBD, to join and sometimes sing in the library's reading group for children. "Blacktown Library was where I learned to love reading," she says.

On Sundays, she and her family would attend the Love of Jesus Church, a predominantly Filipino evangelical church. “Even though we were the only black family there, we were always welcome,” Faith says. “What I love about my Filipino sisters and brothers is that even though we are from different ethnicities, we have the same values. We know that the way we as minorities progress is through education. It’s our train ticket to everywhere.”

When Faith was 15, her family moved 60 kilometres south to Camden. She felt less comfortable there. Camden was much whiter, and she felt that people paid more attention to the fact that she was African. As she got older, she grew troubled by Australia’s treatment of Indigenous people and some other aspects of Australian life. Apart from some ABC programs, “I can’t watch Australian TV – only white people are represented.”

All this made Faith think about what it meant to be Australian. When she spoke to cousins in Nigeria, a place she has never been, she felt that part of her identity was missing, in ways that only a journey to Africa, which she plans to make one day, would reveal.

Where Faith does feel completely at home, though, is Blacktown. She has moved in with an older sister who lives there, to be close to the campus. “Even when I was in high school I was worried: how far am I going to have to travel to get to university? Now my uni is right here. I am so happy to be back. I cried the day I left Blacktown. It’s my childhood, where my friends are. It’s my whole story.”

Part II:

From a house to a home:

Place making in Blacktown

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

People came to Blacktown to build homes. But once tucked up inside the walls, they realised they wanted to be with other people, to eat and drink, make money, learn, argue, fight, grieve, dance, play and pray. So they went out to build again.

The institutions a community creates, the places in which its people meet, eventually come to define and shape the life of that community. The new university is one of these institutions; there are many others.

Learning:

St Michael's Blacktown South

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | John Laffan

When John Laffan arrived as a young man to teach at St Michael's Primary in Blacktown South in 1978, what struck him most was the involvement of parents in school life. As a Catholic school in a working-class suburb, it had no money.

Parents organised athletics, father-and-son camps, a social club to raise funds. On weekends, tradesmen among the fathers would bring in their tools to build, repair and renovate the school. They put up an entire staircase on the outer wall. The priest told them to make it an exposed stair, to save money. "No, Father, it's going to be enclosed," they replied. Laffan says: "It was the first time I had ever heard a group of laypeople challenge a priest. That community had real power and force in those families."

After a few Laffan left St Michael's, and spent a long time away before returning in 2005, as principal. He found a different school. Australian-born families were still numerous, but the other dominant groups of earlier times, Italians, Germans and Maltese, had been replaced by Filipinos, South Sudanese, Nepalese, Syrians, Indians and Chinese. Not all families were Catholic or even Christian. Parents didn't get involved in school matters: in many of their cultures, teachers were of high status and simply trusted to do the job. "It was a case of, 'You take Mohammed, you take Jong, we're working our butts off to survive here'," Laffan says. The children were happy, as children are, but within families there was a lot more sorrow and trauma than in 1978. Some needed food packages in order to eat. A young Anglo boy was murdered by an uncle in a psychotic rage brought on by amphetamine use.

Noticing that many Sudanese families were finding it hard to become part of the school, Laffan organised a regular evening, with a barbecue, to encourage parents to tell their stories. "The nights were wonderful at first, but we had to stop them, remove the children, because the stories were so horrendous," he says. He remembers one woman saying: "They told us, if we didn't stop dancing, they would shoot us."

Laffan, who is now retired, says that his way of responding to all this strife was to wait every morning at the school gate. As the families approached, parents would offer him greetings. Sikhs would join their hands in prayer in front of their chests, and bow slightly. Sudanese and African Muslim men would clasp his elbow with their left hand and shake with their right. Some Christians would cross themselves, others would briefly take his hand. "It was a wonderful moment, the understanding that we were all sharing in this," Laffan says. "I feel nothing but gratitude for that time, and for what those parents taught me."

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Recovery:

Marrin Weejali Aboriginal Corporation, Blackett

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Tony Hunter and Melinda Bonham

Tony Hunter and Melinda Bonham were sitting on the porch of their house in Shalvey, a suburb of Blacktown, when Hunter fell silent, lost in thought. It was 1994, and the local Aboriginal community had endured a long cycle of drug and alcohol addiction, trauma, and premature death. After a while, Hunter spoke: "I've gotta do something to help my people." Marrin Weejali Aboriginal Corporation was born out of that thought.

When Hunter first shakes your hand, he holds your gaze a long time, calmly sizing you up, perhaps looking for a common bond. His outback New South Wales drawl is slow, but his mind feels fully engaged. Tell him he looks a lot younger than his 69 years and he looks sceptical: "I lost ten years to alcohol in there."

As Hunter strolls around Marrin Weejali's crowded two-storey building in the Mount Druitt suburb of Blackett, he introduces Rob and Brian, drug and alcohol counsellors. Another man, Drew, simply walks up, shakes hands, and identifies himself as a recovering alcoholic: "I can't say enough for what Marrin has done for me," he says. An outsider cannot easily tell counsellors from clients, which is not surprising, since six of the centre's 10 counsellors, along with Hunter, were once addicts themselves.

In the back courtyard, Hunter introduces another worker, Steve. "I found him on the side of the road chasing a lizard," Hunter says. The reference is mysterious to all but Steve, who laughs, and lingers to chat. No one is in a hurry; everyone seems to have time, and to be on the other side of a great trial.

Established by Hunter and Bonham in 1996, Marrin Weejali is Sydney's only Aboriginal-run drug and alcohol service. In Wiradjuri, the most widely spoken Aboriginal language in NSW, marrin means body and spirit, weejali means essence. The goal is to unite these two in the one person. Marrin's core philosophy grows out of the therapeutic community model and programs such as Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous, which are built on the belief that people sharing their common experience can solve their common problem.

Groups meet to discuss not only addiction but mental health, family planning, anger management, and domestic violence. While some are for Kooris only, others are open to all; Marrin Weejali takes anyone who walks through the door. While 80 to 90 per cent of clients are Indigenous, others have white, Islander and South Sudanese backgrounds. "We can't say no to these non-Aboriginal people, because they grew up with Aboriginal people," says Hunter. "If you went to school with an Aboriginal fella and he comes in here, where are you going to go? You become part of the Aboriginal community."

The steady federal funding Marrin Weejali receives — $2.4 million a year at present — is both a measure of its effectiveness, and of the need. "The demand for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander substance misuse… services is appalling," states a Marrin Weejali annual report." That demand has only grown over the past 10 years with the ravages of the state's methamphetamines epidemic.

More than a drug and alcohol service, Marrin Weejali is a response to a social experiment that was to have profound, sometimes devastating, impacts on Aboriginal people. That experiment was born of hope. In the 1960s, many Aboriginal people saw an opportunity to leave behind the oppression of the missions and small towns of outback NSW, and to start a new life in the city. Aboriginal leader Chicka Dixon called it a mass migration "from the riverbanks to Sydney." These journeys were no less difficult, in many ways more so, than those made by newcomers from overseas, writes Western Sydney University sociologist George Morgan in his book, Unsettled Places: Aboriginal People and Urbanisation in New South Wales. He calls them "narratives of migration."

Many of these migrants arrived in Mount Druitt just as the state government opened the area to public housing. A Housing for Aborigines program was established in 1969. The modernist planning principles of the time sought to clear what were seen as the cramped and unhygienic slums of the inner cities. In new outer suburbs, more spacious houses, quiet streets and big backyards with trees would lead to better lives. But as early as 1969, a local state MP warned that the population was running way ahead of planning. "There are thousands of children in the area, no playing fields, no meeting places, nothing for teenagers to do, and inadequate transport facilities to take them anywhere." These problems dog the area even today.

Many families did see their material conditions improve. But there was a catch, writes Morgan. "Prospective Housing Commission tenants from all social backgrounds – Anglo working class, migrant, Indigenous - had to demonstrate that they were capable of living in a manner deemed respectable by those petty officials who assessed their applications."

These pressures fell especially heavily on Indigenous people, Morgan writes. Having been told for generations that their culture and ways of life

were worthless, most "naturally felt exposed and inadequate when they moved into suburban housing." Neighbours watched them closely; the Commission discouraged visits by relatives; a woman was twice threatened with eviction because her lawn was not cut. Morgan writes of women, whose male partners were often absent, who succeeded beyond expectations. "They struggled assiduously to keep their houses cleaner than those around them. They dressed their children neatly and respectfully. They were strong and held families together."

One of the Aboriginal women who moved to Sydney and into Mount Druitt public housing was Connie Hunter, along with her son Tony, then 20, and his seven siblings.

On a warm Wednesday in April, Hunter sits down to tell his story. He speaks very slowly, laughing sometimes, pausing often, occasionally closing his eyes and remembering.

He and his brothers and sisters grew up in a tin humpy on the banks of the Barwon River, in Brewarrina, or Bree, in far western New South Wales. In the 1930s, when Connie was just a girl, welfare officers removed her from her family on Angledool Station in the far north of NSW, and brought her to the Brewarrina mission. Two of Connie's sisters had lost all their children to the welfare officers. Whenever the welfare cars came into view, the Hunter children would jump into the river and swim to the other side.

Hunter took to Sydney life. He worked as a welfare office for an Aboriginal organisation, then as a foreman for a meat company in Chullora. But in the 1970s, marijuana and amphetamine use were adding to alcohol problems in Mount Druitt, Hunter says. "They caused a lot of division among the Aboriginal people, a lot of thieving. A lot of people were burying their children. The grieving was horrific. And there weren't any programs for Aboriginal people to help them, counsel them."

Calmly, he lists the casualties in his family. "My old (step) dad, he went first, he died in '77. Then my sister in '84; she was hit by a truck while on the drink. He didn't stop, and they never found him. Then a young brother died in his sleep with an enlarged heart, alcohol related. Then another brother, then another, all from the alcohol and the speed. These three brothers didn't see 35 years of age."

In 1989, at the age of 54, Connie had a stroke and died two years later – in part, Hunter believes, of grief.

"By this time, after burying them all, I'm hittin' the drink pretty heavy by now," he says. "I was trying to sedate pain, but it was everywhere. I didn't want to live, and I didn't want to die."

He can name the date when everything changed: January 7, 1992. He had been caught drink driving. "My probation officer knew a bloke named Les Beckett. One of those tall Queensland Aboriginal fellas. Now Les Beckett, he had lived an hour and a half from Bree over the border.

I'd known him since I was 11 or 12. He'd gotten sober about three years before. The probation officer said, 'Take this paper over to Les, he's going to take you to AA meetings, and you tick them off on this form.'"

Hunter says he had already been drinking that morning when he took a cab to Beckett's place in St Mary's, just west of Blacktown. "Les came out of his house and put his arms around me. He cuddled me. And he said, 'Tony. I knew God would bring you back to me.' And I said to myself, 'Oh no, don't tell me. He must have done Bible studies. He must have turned a Christian.'"

Inside his house, Beckett read the form Hunter had brought from the probation officer, then threw it in the bin. "He said, 'Tony, there's no ticking boxes here, mate. There's a meeting on at St Mary's at half-past twelve. Come with me. You might be able to get sober.'"

They went to the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. People stood up and told their stories of fighting the grog. Hunter hated and scorned every minute of it. But at the end of the meeting, "they're all coming up shaking my hand, all these whitefellas, saying, 'Hello Tony, how are you mate?'"

The men went back to Les's place. "We sat around a big table, and they were just constantly talking to me. It was a windy, cloudy sort of day, and I was looking up at the sky thinking about all the people I've lost. I was grieving so much, looking at the clouds, and the tears were rolling out of my eyes. These guys didn't pull any punches with me. They said, 'Tony, there's a way out, mate. You don't have to drink to have a good life.' I felt the spiritual part of it through these guys. They were living it. And they were interested in my future, my life. I'd never felt this before."

Hunter went to more meetings. He began to see a counsellor who had also been an alcoholic. "It was like I got this new awakening. I just rocketed out of the dead zone, the evil spirit, where I was pinned down by alcohol."

He and Bonham were a good fit for creating Marrin Weejali: his storytelling power, her gifts in organisation. They consulted addiction specialists, other rehabilitation centres; both did diplomas in drug and alcohol counselling. The first clients came to meetings at the Holy Family Church in Emerton in Mount Druitt, and to a "cultural healing group" that Hunter ran on the banks of the Hawkesbury River at Windsor. The State Government provided a Housing Commission property in Emerton. As word of the service spread, the organisation was soon busting out

of its three-room cottage. In 2008, federal funding enabled Hunter and Bonham to open a much larger centre in Blackett.

But it took eight years to build. The locals fought hard against having an Aboriginal drug and alcohol centre in their midst. The case went all the way to the state Land and Environment Court. After the centre was opened, an old man would walk past and throw dog faeces over the fence. A woman who lived out the back would fire her hose over the fence and drench a group of men sitting in the backyard doing a 12-step program.

Slowly, however, Marrin Weejali put down roots. Bonham says attitudes changed when the Federal Government asked them to be a drop-in centre for filling out the 2011 Census. The goal was to address an undercount of Indigenous people in 2006, but any local was able to fill out the form at the centre. "White people would come in, hesitate – 'What am I going to walk into?' Our staff would say, 'Hello, how are you, would you like a cup of tea?' That really broke down a lot of barriers. Some of those people still drop in today."

Marrin Weejali's open-door policy has taken it beyond its original mission. Locals use its optometrist, and the centre distributes government vouchers to help low-income people pay their energy bills. Young people can volunteer at Marrin Weejali to pay off fines for misdemeanours such as travelling on a train without a ticket. A counsellor, Lesley Strickland, says Aboriginal people see the centre's phone service as "like the Black Yellow Pages: have you got a number for this doctor, where can I get my cat desexed?"

"Marrin Weejali has never been broken into," says Hunter. "It tells me that the community has taken ownership of this centre." He laughs: "Marrin is a sacred protected site."

Bonham says she still sees racism towards young Aboriginal people by some local police. "Strip searching, out in the open, pull them over for no reason, harassment. It's disgusting." On the other hand, police use Marrin Weejali's rooms for meetings, as do corrections officers and other public servants. The centre employs a Vietnamese psychologist and works with a Chinese doctor. "I think there's still racism in this community but there is quite a bit of learning and blending," Bonham says.

Most important is the long connection Hunter and Bonham have to the Mount Druitt community. People think, "If Tony can beat his addiction, I can too," Hunter says. The six Aboriginal counsellors at Marrin Weejali are all from Mount Druitt and "all defeated the drug ice." Bonham says Aboriginal people make good counsellors.

"With the sorrow and trauma, you understand other people's journey better. Non-Aboriginal people feel that walking in the door."

She and Hunter are seeking funding to open residential services for men and women who need a home while they try to recover from addiction. Hunter also wants to develop programs that take Aboriginal people back to the bush, "and have people meet them, and walk with them, and say, 'This is where your family comes from – this is why they left.' To create that opportunity for reflection, to lift their spirit. Some of the stories are sadder than mine. They bring tears to my eyes."

There are heartening stories, too. Hunter tells of a girl from far north Queensland who was using ice. She tapped 'Aboriginal' and 'drug and alcohol' into Google, and found Marrin Weejali. Staff found her sitting in the foyer with a suitcase and a three-year old child. "She's living in a nice unit now, she's working, four or five years sober. She still comes to the NA meetings here on a Friday."

The Aboriginal journey from the bush brought gains as well as losses. It led to the development of urban Indigenous organisations, what Morgan calls a "pan-Aboriginal culture and politics." The work of the late Maria Lane, an Indigenous academic from South Australia, has shown how the postwar migration from the missions have been critical to the surge of Indigenous university students to 20,000 today, twice as many as 10 years before. Some of these students come from Blacktown.

But the journey was not kind to Connie Hunter. "I think she regretted leaving her homeland," her son says. "Down here, there were nice big hotels where she and her friends went to have lunch. I think she joined the Rooty Hill RSL Club, the hospitality she really enjoyed. But it was a different world."

It has become her son's world. "I've been here for 50 years and survived," Hunter says. Although he and Bonham have moved to "a lovely home" in Windsor, on Saturday mornings, he skips the local shops and drives for half an hour to have coffee at a Greek café in Mount Druitt. "Once you learn to sleep with one eye open, Mount Druitt is a great place. There's a lot of people that have come here from the fringes of town, from the world of decency. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The Tongan community – I talk to some of their elders. You look in their eyes when you talk to them -- they're beautiful people. People of understanding. Want to work together, live together."

Hunter sees us out through the Marrin Weejali courtyard, where two men are making coffee. "This is where people have a cigarette together, where a lot of yarns happen."

"Healing can begin with a handshake," he says. "It knocks down the barrier, reflects straight back into here." He points at his chest: "The spirit is right here, between our rib cage. Let's shine a little bit of light and hope in here."

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Faith:

Gurdwara Sahib Glenwood

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Ravinderjit (Ravi) Singh

In the early 1980s, a small group of Sikh immigrants, looking for a place to build a temple, managed to pool enough money to buy a two-bedroom fibro house beside a paddock in the Blacktown suburb of Parklea (now called Glenwood).

To raise the funds, they agisted horses in the paddock, and sold chicken drumsticks at the Blacktown Festival for 20 cents. A Dr Sidhu toured the United States soliciting small donations from Sikh communities, and brought home $20,000.

Over time, properties next to the paddock became available to buy. More Sikhs came, community finances improved, the fibro house came down. A Sikh builder brought his backhoe to flatten the land, an engineer drained the property and built culverts. Donations flowed in from overseas. It took many years to build, but today the white walls and golden onion domes of the Gurdwara Sahib Glenwood rise like an Indian palace above the car yards and lighting warehouses of Sunnyholt Road, and the ramps onto the roaring M7 motorway.

Amongst Blacktown's many places of worship and faith-based institutions, the dominant ones, over many decades, have belonged to the Catholic Church. After the government high school – and perhaps the union movement in the past – no one organisation has done more than the church (and its schools) to bring migrants into Australian life. The 2018 National Church Life Survey found that half of all Australian Catholic parishes were multicultural (defined by the share of parishioners who came from culturally diverse backgrounds). Across all Australian churches the figure was 23 per cent of parishes; in the USA, it was 14 per cent. The Blacktown Catholic church is almost certainly more multicultural again than the national church.

But Blacktown is now home to people of many denominations and faiths. One of these groups, Sikhs may be growing faster than any other. Two-thirds of Australia's 125,000 Sikhs arrived between 2006 and 2016, according to the book, The Indian Diaspora: Hindus and Sikhs in Australia.

Sikhs are younger than the general population and better educated: one in three has a degree, compared to one in four Australians. Even so, nearly 40 per cent of Sikhs work as machinery operators, taxi drivers, couriers or laborers.

Melbourne has the largest Sikh population but 11,000 live in Blacktown, and they enjoy use of the largest and most splendid gurdwara in the Southern Hemisphere.

Narinder Singh meets me on the porch, and hands me a makeshift turban for male visitors to wear. As we walk barefoot around the carpeted prayer hall, Singh, a member of the committee of the Australian Sikh Association, which manages the gurdwara, tells me about his religion: its origin in the 15th century, its respect for women and for science. He shows me the downstairs langar, a large kitchen and eating area where all Sikhs are expected to volunteer, cooking and serving vegetarian food. He also gently corrects my use of the word, temple: a gurdwara is not just a place of worship but a house to bring the community together.

The gurdwara, which is located in the wealthier, northern part of Blacktown, hosts computer, exercise and English classes for seniors and Saturday Punjabi language school for the young. Hindus as well as Sikhs attend the seniors classes, and Hindu, Sinhalese and Jain groups use the large eating area when they want to stage events. The gurdwara raised $30,000 for bushfire victims under the slogan, 'Mates helping mates.' School groups are regularly invited to the gurdwara to learn about Sikhism. The community is keen to tell its Australian story, and that is how I find myself sitting around a table with four men and two women.

The men are Narinder, Pritpal, Gurvijay and Ravinderjit (Ravi), who is chair of the Australian Sikh Association. I'll use their first names since all Sikh men take Singh, which means lion, as a second name. Some also use a third, family, name – for example, Gurvijay's final name is Bhatti and Pritpal's is Tiwana. Their wives are Rosie Kaur Bhatti and Mandeep Kaur Tiwana. All Sikh women take the name, Kaur, which means prince, the masculine term being a mark of equality.

The six all work in high-level manufacturing, accountancy, computer science and public service jobs. "We all had privileged lives in India," says Ravi Singh. All left with only a few suitcases and the few dollars they were allowed to carry out of the country, largely for the sake of children they didn't yet have. None regret the decision to migrate, even if they have made sacrifices along the way.

In India, both Gurvijay and Rosie both topped their university faculties: Gurvijay in mechanical engineering, Rosie in biochemistry. But in 1984 the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by two of her Sikh bodyguards sparked pogroms and the murder of nearly 3000 Sikhs, most of them in New Delhi, the couple's home.

[4] Information about the origin of the gurdwara comes from an interview for the Blacktown Memories project given by Sirwan Singh Roopra and Jeevanjeet Kaur Roopra, 14 August, 2017.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

"That was the trigger point," says Rosie. "We thought, 'Let's go to a country where we can safely raise a family.'"

They arrived in Sydney in 1989. While Rosie worked part-time in customer service in a government department, Gurvijay looked for jobs in his field. He received hundreds of rejection letters. They all said he needed local experience or qualifications, or he was over-qualified. He tried out for the police, but at that time NSW police did not accept applicants in turbans. Deciding, with sorrow, that he would never be an engineer, Gurvijay enrolled in a master's degree in computer science after reading in the paper that the field had many jobs.

He also finally found work, as a guard on the trains. To get to the rail yards in the inner city, he would get up at 3.30 or 4am and drive or take a train from the couple's home in Hassall Grove, Mount Druitt. Once his shift was over, he would sleep for a few hours in a park before travelling to the University of New South Wales to take evening classes, and get home by around 10.30pm.

How did he get through this time? He laughs. "In Punjabi language we have a term, Chardi Kala." It means the state of rising above adversity by maintaining continual optimism and joy.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

In time, he became a computer scientist. The couple's daughter, Simran, and son, Jayraj, were both offered places in James Ruse Agricultural High School, by some measures Australia's most academically selective high school. But Rosie says "we didn't want to be typical Indian parents"; they liked the looseness and freedom of Australian culture, and wanted their children to enjoy their childhoods. They enrolled them at Baulkham Hills High School, also selective, but not quite as pressured as James Ruse. Both children made friends from all backgrounds and went on to become doctors. Jayraj spends much of his spare time abseiling, canyoning and rock climbing — "not very Indian," says Rosie with a laugh.

Chardi Kala probably helped Ravi Singh as well. He was teaching at the Punjab Agricultural University and on the way to a professorship. But after deciding to emigrate and arriving in Sydney with his wife, Anupjot, in 1995, Singh applied for more than 100 jobs as an agronomist, without success.

Undaunted, he switched to local government work as a land use co-ordinator, and now works at the Hills Council next to Blacktown. His son, Amitoj, 25, works as a physiotherapist and research officer at Macquarie University, is coaching captain of a Punjabi bhangra dance group, and plays cricket in his spare time. "He is very proud to be an Australian Sikh," says Singh. "Our kids are doing what we wished to do; we are getting our aspirations through our kids."

The group downplays the existence of prejudice in Australia. "Never from educated people, only uneducated," says Pritpal Tiwana. But life here is not trouble-free. Most Sikh men and boys have stories of being mocked or bullied — called Muhammed or Osama Bin Laden — for wearing the turban or top knot. Last year the daughter of a Sikh police officer sent a petition to Premier Gladys Berejiklian alleging that her father suffered from PTSD as a result of constant slurs against him within the force.

When Rosie's son was six, he was bullied at school by a boy four years older. Jayraj responded by pushing the boy, was seen by a teacher and given a yellow discipline card. Jayraj came home very angry, throwing things around the house. The next day Rosie took a day off work and went straight to the school and into the principal's office. The teacher was called in to explain. "Did you ask my son why he did that?" Rosie demanded. "You are a teacher, I expect you to be fair." The principal, embarrassed and apologetic, said he would handle it.

Two years later, when Jayraj was in Year Two, the school invited him to plant the tree marking its 25th anniversary. "This is how they acknowledged what happened," Rosie says. "I was impressed. Who would do that?"

Sikhs are a warrior caste. "We are a peace-loving people, but if someone starts it, we don't take it," Rosie says.

Nevertheless, she does not believe that everyone who makes an ill-informed comment about a Sikh is a racist. "We come to a different country. People are not aware of what we are. It is up to us to tell them what we are. It is up to them to decide if they want to know us. It is not a blaming game, it is an understanding game."

But other parents tell their sons not to complain about attacks – stoicism is a Sikh trait -- or even blame them for starting the conflict. Ravi Singh says these attitudes have left some boys feeling isolated, unable to express their feelings. Concern about the mental state of their boys, along with a growing focus on bullying across the wider community, has led many Sikhs to feel they should no longer be silent in the face of hostility. Singh says the planned creation of a $200 million, co-educational Sikh Grammar School Australia near Blacktown – the first private school in the Indian community and due to open in 2024 — is partly a response to concerns about Sikh children being bullied in school.

The issue came to a head in May this year, when a 14-year old Sikh boy at Glenwood High School twice stabbed a 16-year old boy using a kirpan, a small curved knife that baptised Sikhs wear as one of the most holy items of their faith. NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian immediately banned the kirpan, saying she was "taken aback" that students could carry knives in schools. Sikh leaders angrily protested that the knife was not a weapon but a religious symbol; some blamed schools for failing to address "underlying bullying and racism," which they said had sparked the incident.

"It's been such a hard time, I've had sleepless nights," says Ravi Singh. But the Sikhs did not merely complain; they formed a 10-person NSW Gurdwara Working Group. Singh and other group members consulted other Sikh communities in Australia and overseas, even the supreme Sikh authority on temporal issues in Amritsar, India. They studied laws in the US, Britain and Canada on carrying kirpans to schools, before making a submission to the NSW Government.

The government's first draft of new guidelines stipulated that the kirpan had to be blunt, and secured with a chain soldered to the belt. It had to be concealed at all times, and during sport either removed or wrapped tightly against the body. The blade could be no more than six centimetres long. Singh says his group accepted all conditions bar one – the blade could be no shorter than 8.5 centimetres or it would lose its significance. The government accepted that condition, Singh says.

In August the NSW Government agreed to adopt the guidelines negotiated with the Sikh community, and they came into effect in schools in October. Provided no further incidents occur, the outcome suggests that a multicultural society such as Australia can resolve difficult disputes -- in this case, a fiercely held religious principle pitted against the need to protect public safety. It also demonstrates how effectively the Sikh community is finding its voice in Australian life.

Talking to the group in the gurdwara, I got a glimpse of why Sikhs are likely to succeed in Australia. Although Sikhs are not persecuted in India at this time, the group is worried about what rising Hindu nationalism in India (and in Australia, as we will see) means for their people, who number fewer than 21 million. Australia's lack of corruption, compared to India, also impresses them. In a sense they have burnt their ships. Australia is where they will make their home, because they must.

"The migrants now are fully turbaned, and can take any job; they won't face the problems we faced," says Narinder Singh. "We have created the gurdwara so they can flourish better than us."

Rosie also has no regrets. She has stayed in the same government department for 30 years, and now holds a senior role in customer service. She was able to work part-time while raising two children, an opportunity she says she would not have had in India. "In Australia, females can hold any position – and if I decide not to apply for one it is nobody else's fault but mine. No one has ever targeted me for wearing salwar kameez (traditional Indian dress). I will never go back to India. I have been given so many opportunities here."

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Law and order:

Com4Unity Blacktown CBD

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Mark Wright

From the early to mid-2000s, South Sudanese refugees began arriving in large numbers in Blacktown, where public and low-cost housing was available. Soon, groups of young, tall, black men could be seen hanging around the Blacktown shops.

The Council felt unprepared, and frustrated that neither the federal nor state government had provided any notice – let alone funding – to help it manage a significant change to the composition of its population. Schools, already under pressure in a low-income area, struggled to cope with troubled students who spoke little English. Many locals were also unhappy. Blacktown faced the biggest test of its multiculturalism in his history.

"There was a real fear at the time," says Greenway MP Michelle Rowland, who was then a Blacktown councillor. "Council got this constant feedback: 'There are all these tall, dark people standing around and I feel intimidated. This is not the Blacktown I used to know, I don't feel like I belong here any more.' I always thought it was bizarre: doesn't everyone stand around? You're just noting that they're black. But the fact that it never boiled over into race riots was really lucky." Rowland says the Howard Government had not provided enough services to manage the change. "Some non-government organisations stepped in to help but a lot of the work fell to the local area command of the police."

The man Rowland is talking about, Mark Wright, has booked a room at Blacktown Council for our interview. Tall, with no sign of grey hair, he has at the age of 59 swapped his police uniform for jeans and a loose-fitting white shirt. He is a consultant now, and a mentor at a few organisations, including AFL club Greater Western Sydney. The printed PowerPoint presentation in his hand is entitled Com4Unity, and Wright proudly explains the wordplay: "It stands for Connecting Our Minds for Unity, with the 4 meaning the fourth floor of Westpoint."

Wright took over as commander of Blacktown Police in 2008. He had been a cop since the age of 19, had worked in the drug squad, undercover unit and surveillance branch, but this was his first command of a major station, in an area that he says his predecessor called "Chernobyl". Wright's brief, or part of it, was to reduce youth crime. The two main trouble sites were Blacktown Station and Westpoint mall.

Westpoint had just become the first shopping centre in Sydney to ban school students during school hours. "We were all scared," Harry Bevitt, a juice bar owner, told 7.30 in 2012. "We had gangs jumping the counter in the night time and stealing whatever wasn't bolted down - drinks, machinery, knives." Businesses were leaving the mall. "There were scuffles all the time, it was very dangerous to go into Westpoint," says Cate Sydes, then CEO of Marist Youth Care, which has a big office in Blacktown.

Westpoint has a stage on its fourth floor, an open area surrounded by cafes and restaurants that leads to the centre's car park. Wright says young Sudanese men were using the stage as a place to krump, a hip-hop dance with slow, exaggerated arm movements performed to the boom of a ghetto blaster. The men were not hassling anyone but "it was causing confrontation. They had adopted American dress, baseball hats sideways, gold chains – people were scared, thought they were gangsters." Security guards would kick them off the stage, they would move to the car park and keep dancing, until the police showed up.

"The police had grabbed about six of these poor Sudanese kids, bundled them into the paddy wagon and taken them to the station," the then operations manager of Westpoint, George Giannakos, told researcher Sophie Yates. Giannakos thought: "This is not on. We should be saying, 'Hey guys, disperse, stop dancing in the car park'." The Westpoint manager ran to the police station to say he didn't want the young men arrested. "That was the first time I met Mark Wright. Mark said, 'Oh, look, that's good, we won't press charges.' He saw that as an opportunity."

Wright knew he needed allies like Giannakos. And he needed time. Tensions around Westpoint were growing. He says some young Sudanese men would clash with security guards then run outside the centre and stand, arms crossed, on a line beyond which they knew the guards had no authority. Others were accusing police of targeting and sometimes beating them.

In his first meeting, Wright sat down with Ajang Biar, a Sudanese community leader, and Jorge Aroche of the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors. Biar said he had phone recordings made by young Sudanese men of police calling them "black bastards". Wright says he told him: "If you play me that I am obliged to take it forward as an official complaint. The alternative – give me three months to have a look around and see what I can find out."

He learnt that a problem was growing conflict between young men from Islander and Sudanese backgrounds. Thursday night at Westpoint was known as "fight night."

Crowds of young people would gather on the fourth floor, and "some Sudanese and Islander boys would go hell for leather," Wright says.

But "it wasn't just Sudanese — Anglo-Saxon, Islanders, Indigenous, Turkish, Filipino, other Africans – you name it," he said. He did not believe the conflict had "a racial undertone. I think it was just kids, testosterone. They were having a go at people from a different group." The media would portray the fights as melees but usually it was "two or three kids punching on, and the rest watching."

Social media swelled the size of the crowd: word of a fight would go out and people would jump on a train and come from as far as Campbelltown, 50 kilometres away, to watch. A crucial step Wright and his officers took was to get a bail condition imposed on any adult not from Blacktown who had been convicted of affray: if they were caught back in the area they would be charged with a breach of bail. That reduced trouble a lot. It also showed that many Blacktown youth were getting an unfair rap for the fights.

Beyond that change, Wright says he had no plan, just two principles: build relationships in the good times, "not when they go pear-shaped," and get everyone with a stake in the problem around the table. These two principles condensed into two words that Wright wrote on a Post-it note and carried in his wallet: Mutual Respect.

He began by holding meetings in a room in Westpoint mall. The eight or nine people around the table represented Blacktown communities, churches, Westpoint, police and a welfare organisation, Marist Youth Care. He had one question: what do we do?

Wright suggested holding weekly walks through the shopping centre, some during the day, some on "fight night". The walkers would be people around the table or their colleagues, three police officers, and a principal or deputy principal from a local school. The goal was simply to talk to young people, get to know them, without confrontation.

Wright made all his 180 operations officers do at least one walk, and he walked every Thursday for two years. Community elders who walked with police also played a vital role. Wright says with a smile that one Islander woman stood up in church the following Sunday and scolded parents: do you know what your children are up to, what your girls are wearing? "It was good – the message was going out in communities."

The second idea involved regular soccer matches between high school teams and police — "cops and kids running around a paddock having fun, with the whole school coming out to watch." Wright says the games brought another benefit: "That night those kids would be in Westpoint, and the cops would be there on shift, and

[5] This section draws on interviews conducted by Sophie Yates for a case study of Com4Unity for the Australia New Zealand School of Government and Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

the kids would come over and say, 'Got past ya today.' They'd have a bit of friendly banter, start to build a bit of a relationship." In time, the police-school games became the annual Com4Unity Cup, held at the Blacktown Workers Club grounds, with Council staff and Rotary putting on a sausage sizzle.

The third idea: youth workers suggested asking young people at Westpoint and around the station what they most wanted to see in Blacktown. Of the 2500 surveyed, most said they wanted more music, dance and drama. Joanne (JoJo) and Joe Tau, youth workers of Samoan background who were married at the time, came up with the idea of Switch, a dance and music showcase to be held on the same Westpoint stage where young people and security guards used to clash. They called it Switch, because "it was like a light switch, you dance to come out of the dark and come into the light".

Most importantly, JoJo Tau said the young people themselves had to run it. "Let the kids take ownership of it, let's mentor them so they take pride in what they're doing and believe in what they're delivering."

Tau told Yates about the excitement Switch generated. Everyone pitched in. "Joe and I came up with the program, and then we were like, 'We need a venue.' Westpoint goes, 'I can get the venue for you guys.' And then, 'We need some food for the kids.' Hillsong was like, 'I'll bring that.' We needed some help; Marist said, 'I'll bring some youth workers for you.' That's exactly how it worked for a long time. It was about bringing what we had and making it work."

For more than seven years, Switch – or Beat Town Showcase, its other name – ran on Thursday nights on the Westpoint stage, organised, run and DJed by young people. Blacktown's mayor at that time, Alan Pendleton, and another councillor, current mayor Tony Bleasdale, would sit in the front row. "I still get goosebumps when I think about it," Wright says. "Rotary had the barbecue going, you'd have 300 or 400 people, singing, dancing, krumping – that top floor was pumping."

"The gangs of kids that were hanging around hated each other, but they didn't know each other," said Cate Sydes, the then CEO of Marist Youth Care. "Once they started organising this stuff, the Africans saw that the Filipinos were actually nice people … We would have the United Nations on the stage, it was just a magnificent thing."

The initiative generated other ideas, such as homework clubs, and workshops for 40 to 60 young people on how to apply for jobs. Westpoint gave some of the young people jobs. "We went from kids ratting shopping centres to packing shelves," Wright says. In 2014, after the gang rape of a girl of Islander background sparked new clashes between Islander and

African men, Joe and JoJo Tau and police staged a Unity Walk through Blacktown streets to call for an end to violence.

Not all Blacktown police were happy with Wright's initiatives, and some of his critics were his senior managers. "Some had the attitude, 'Our job is not to play with kids,'" Wright says. But he insists the initiative was never about being soft on crime or criminals. In fact, he says, pointing to his PowerPoint slides, "these stats would save me."

Graphs on the slides show steady drops in robberies, car thefts, and breaking and entering in the years between 2007 and 2011. Giannakos said car thefts from Westpoint car park dropped from one a day to zero. Wright thinks crime rates dropped not because the young people involved in Com4Unity had previously been criminals, but because the initiative's success freed up police to tackle other crime instead of having to constantly patrol Westpoint and other youth hangouts.

He thinks about two-thirds of his staff supported the initiative. "The quality of the Sudanese leadership was important. When Ajang Biar spoke to my young cops they hung off his every word."

But one lesson that comes out of tough, neglected places like Blacktown is that good ideas and programs can struggle to survive.

In 2014, Wright left the job. His successor showed little interest in the project. Giannakos also moved to a new job, and Sydes's role at Marist Youth Care expanded, leaving her with less time. Word had spread among police forces about Com4Unity, and police from Melbourne and even Canada came to have a look. But when a senior commander from Logan, a tough part of Brisbane, decided to investigate the initiative, he delegated the task to a junior constable. The man called Wright and asked him to "send through the brochure." Four or five years ago, Com4Unity quietly died.

Sydes said the problem was that as people moved on, their successors saw only the crop, not the work that had been done to grow it. "The weeding and the ploughing, the moving of rocks, all of those things had been done by a man like Mark Wright…It doesn't take very long, two or three years, for it to go back to the way it was. Sadly, the need is still there. The one thing we're not short of is kids. Kids that are disengaged, kids that are sitting on the outside of society."

The story is by no means all sad. "Mark had a very big role in transforming Blacktown," says Om Dhungel, a Bhutanese community leader who sits on the NSW Police Multicultural Advisory Council. "Blacktown Station used to be very scary in some way. Young people standing around; you had to navigate through them so you didn't get pushed. That's all changed."

That period of policing brought other benefits. Wright helped JoJo Tau, whom he says was more important than anyone else to the success of the initiative, to get a job running the Blacktown Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC), a role she holds today. He also found a home at the PCYC for an initiative dreamed up by a young man from South Sudan. Wright had met him at SydWest, and invited him on the Thursday night walks through Westpoint. His name is Mayor Chagai.

Wright had been on the board of the Blacktown-based SydWest Multicultural Services, which delivers services that try to keep young people out of trouble. Blacktown's current chief inspector, Bob Fitzgerald, is chair of SydWest. When the so-called "African gangs" conflict was consuming Melbourne in 2018, Fitzgerald told a News Limited reporter that such a problem was extremely uncommon in Blacktown. "When these things do happen, we find they are carried out by people from a range of backgrounds from Filipinos, Anglos, Islanders ... people from all over the world. We don't have mass gangs roaming the street. You might see groups of Sudanese people, but you'll see people of lots of different cultures hanging together as well."

"I feel that I've let some people down because I wasn't able to sustain these programs," Wright says. But he remains optimistic that others can replicate them elsewhere.

"The concept is simply building relationships, understanding the environment and bringing key people together. At the end of the day, you've just got to talk to people, treat them like people."

I asked him what in his life had motivated him to try the approach he had taken in Blacktown. He said he didn't have a brilliant answer. "You start as a cop jumping fences and chasing crooks, it's exciting, but as you get older you see the best way you can contribute is to lead your team, and to work with a community to prevent bad stuff happening."

He'd had good parents, and had a family of his own -- a wife and three sons -- who were important to him. "I look at kids, whether they're in the dock or on the street, and wonder if you can create a positive environment for them, or be a mentoring role model, or find someone in their community to do that, if they don't have one at home. After that, the ball's in your court, bud."

Over his career, Wright has completed two masters degrees, in public administration and public policy. But he says that nothing he learnt in those courses was more valuable than the two words he first wrote on a yellow Post-it note: Mutual Respect.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Play:

Savannah Pride, Shalvey

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Mayor Chagai

Boys are running in rows of three down the court. Legs, shouts, the smack of bouncing balls. As one boy passes to another, the third fans out to take the next pass, then he leaps and dunks. Some boys are already in flight and soaring towards the basket when they take the ball, almost delicately, then slam it through the hoop.

On the side a man in a blue tracksuit watches intently, but not so much that he fails to see a boy trying to slip unnoticed into the gym, a hard thing to do when you are 200 centimetres tall.

"Akuei!" Mayor Chagai calls out. "Why are you late?"

The boy, hands in the pockets of his black tracksuit pants, looks uneasy and mumbles. He missed a train connection at Granville; the floods…

"You're coming from Campbelltown? What time did you leave?"

"Ten thirty," says the boy. That is four and a half hours ago. To be fair, Campbelltown is almost 50 kilometres from here, but Chagai is not satisfied: "Why didn't you leave at 8?"

Akuei shrugs, looks down, and says quietly: "Mum was at work."

"And you had to look after the kids, right?" Chagai's tone softens. "Alright." But then: "Why didn't you text me? You text next time you're going to be late. OK, jump in." Akuei enters the line, waiting to join the boys flowing in waves down the court.

"I wanted him to explain to me what was going on," Chagai says. "If he gets a job and turns up late, then doesn't communicate to the boss why he's late, then he won't have that job."

It is a Saturday afternoon at the Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) in Shalvey, a suburb of Mount Druitt, and the under-18 squad of the Savannah Pride basketball club has been training for 15 minutes. But Chagai – or "Coach," as players call him – has been taking training sessions since five in the morning. All Saturday and on weeknights, he trains groups from under-12 to open age – about 250 players in all, including 20 girls.

The players are mostly from South Sudanese families, but others have Islander, Lebanese, Chinese, Serbian, Italian, and Anglo backgrounds. One white boy from the Central Coast played one game against Savannah Pride and was so impressed that he

left his old club and now makes the two-hour journey to Shalvey every weekend. Two days after this training run he would be playing in a grand final of the local competition, along with seven of Savannah Pride's 10 teams.

The club, now 14 years old, has caught the eye of the basketball world. American scouts have swooped on Savannah Pride, recruiting more than 20 of its players to play college basketball in the United States. The club and Chagai have featured in The New York Times and on the ABC's Australian Story, and are the subject of a planned movie.

What draws people to the club is not just its success, or the story of its founder, who left his village in South Sudan at the age of seven and wandered across three countries, nearly dying several times, before arriving in Sydney in 2006 as a 22-year old refugee. What draws people is that Chagai wants to teach his players not only how to dribble and dunk a ball but how to study and work and take their place in the community. Here in one of the most disadvantaged urban areas of Australia, where one in three young people are unemployed, Chagai is trying to develop not just good basketballers but fine human beings.

He keeps all his players' numbers in his phone, and often those of their parents, too. Savannah Pride runs a homework club (suspended during the pandemic) and Chagai gets parents to send him school reports. A student that is suspended from school is temporarily banned from playing domestic games. But if a player overdoses and ends up in hospital, or does something that lands him in a police cell, Chagai will turn up to take him home.

"Mayor is a beautiful, beautiful man," says Kasia Rettig, a Polish immigrant whose 15-year old son, William, plays with Savannah Pride and coaches younger boys. "My boy doesn't see his father. Mayor has been like a father to him." She adds: "He is driving me bonkers at home with all the bouncing, but Coach says you have to have a ball in your hand."

"Coach is really tough, but it's to get the best out of us," says Isaac Chol, an 18-year old player whose uncle is Deng Adut, the Sudanese-born criminal lawyer from Blacktown, author of Songs of a War Boy and the 2017 NSW Australian of the Year. Chol says that Chagai "doesn't sing out, but he tells us straight up when we're being lazy, and if you don't like it, tough." One punishment for laziness, Chol says, is "the monkey," a painful run around the gym in the squat position.

This year Chol got into Macquarie University but not to study law, as he had hoped. Instead, he enrolled in a course in business administration. He was disappointed, but Chagai told him not to lose heart; he could transfer later. "He's definitely made me more resilient," Chol says.

Missing this Saturday afternoon are two vital figures in the story of the club. The first is its co-founder, Emmanuel Acouth, Chagai's long-time

friend and fellow player. The second is the former commander of Blacktown police, and now chair of the Savannah Pride board, Mark Wright. The partnership and friendship between Chagai and Wright has been central to the club's survival and success. "What started out as a mentor relationship has become much more than that," says filmmaker Brendan Fletcher. "Mayor has no family here, and very few elders in Sydney who can play that role for him. Mark is one."

Over two Saturdays at the Shalvey PCYC, Chagai told me a little of his story. As he spoke, he kept half an eye on his players and occasionally interjected: "Micky, you guys should not be shooting while the kids are playing. Sumogo – out!"

When Chagai told the story of his long journey, the disappointment of his basketball career, the friends he lost, he seemed to be carrying sorrow. But when he talked about basketball, his face would light up, almost grow mischievous. They seemed to be two opposing sides of him, but in fact, they come from the same place.

Sport, he says, must start with having fun, or young people will not play. But fun matters, because players who enjoy the game can learn to take risks, make bold decisions, believe in themselves and, above all, overcome fear. The best players are great, Chagai says, not primarily because they have skills or fitness, but because they make good decisions. And they make good decisions because they are not afraid.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Mayor Chagai and Mark Wright

Photo by Savannah Pride

Many coaches focus on skills and drills, and accordingly produce players who are always afraid of making mistakes. Chagai does not want his players to be reckless, but he wants them to play instinctively, take risks, trust themselves and their team mates. Confidence in the game can lead to confidence in work and in life. He learnt all this, he says, as a refugee.

He was born a cattle herder's son, in Yirol, South Sudan. When he was seven, an older cousin said that if they left the village, they might be able to get educated, or at least save their lives. The civil war with the north of Sudan was in full flight and government soldiers were bombarding South Sudanese villages. The boys walked with others to Ethiopia, a journey of two months. Many died of illness or hunger or drowned along the way. Bombs fell, battles exploded all around them. "No food, no sleep, hide in the swamp, dig the roots of plants to eat," he remembers. "No day, no night, all time was the same. Someone can be walking around and in the next few minutes, dead. As long as you breathe, that's all you know."

After a year to 18 months in a camp in Ethiopia, that country's regime fell, and they were uprooted again. They crossed the Gilo River again, more people drowned. Others wandered into the bush, got lost. Some were eaten by hyenas and lions. Some went mad, or killed themselves. "I lost so many friends. Eighty to 90 per cent of the people I grew up with have died."

At about the age of nine, Chagai reached Kakuma in Kenya, the world's biggest refugee camp. In this dangerous place, full of violence, Chagai discovered he had a rare gift for basketball. He played first on dirt, and played all day. He made friends, brothers. His journey had taught him the most important thing he needed to know about the game. He had seen fear kill people, seen them give up and drown, or die of thirst, because of fear. But he knew that in the savannah, with wild animals all around, he had overcome his fear. What, then, did he ever need to fear on a basketball court?

After five years in Kakuma, he joined the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, became a child soldier, so that he could return to his village in South Sudan and his mother. Coming home also enabled him to play basketball. He played at high levels in Kenya, Uganda, Egypt. He was offered scholarships to the US, Spain and France. Life was opening up at last.

Then Chagai fell during a basketball tournament and badly broke an arm. His dream of a basketball career in the US died with that fall. He accepted a refugee visa for Australia, and arrived in Blacktown in 2006.

As Chagai speaks, a small boy waits patiently at a distance: could he go home? "Have you called your Mum?" Chagai asks. The boy shakes his head. "Here" – Chagai hands the boy his phone.

"He's new, very shy," Chagai says. "A lot of kids have no parents, or no dads, a lot of single mums. I see myself in them."

Chagai, returning to his story, says that he was lost in Blacktown. Australian English was hard to understand, and many Australians were no less daunting. He enrolled in an agriculture course at Richmond TAFE, and formed a basketball group with 10 or 12 other South Sudanese, most of them teenage boys. But whenever they tried to play a scrimmage game at the PCYC in Blacktown, one particular police officer would kick them out. A stadium in Parramatta kicked them out. The Philippines Basketball Association in Rooty Hill let them play in their games, but only two a side. Then they reduced it to one. "We were tall -- I think they felt intimidated by us," Chagai says. He has no doubt why they were expelled from other courts: "We were different, and black."

Chagai's group began looking as far away as Merrylands and Granville for outdoor courts on which to play. Whenever they found a court, groups of boys, strangers, would appear and challenge them to a game. Often the boys were Islanders but some were Lebanese, Aboriginal, Caucasian. The Sudanese always won, which caused unhappiness, and fights. Sometimes the boys would leave and return with baseball bats, even knives. Chagai was spending all his time pulling away his boys, who wanted to fight back. He was in despair, on the verge of giving up.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

One day in 2007, a Sudanese community leader, Ajang Deng Biar, called him. Blacktown police had hired a Multicultural Liaison Officer, Assefa Bekele, who wanted to meet the basketballers. The Sudanese had no interest: how could anyone help them? But Chagai and seven others agreed to attend a meeting at Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre (now SydWest Multicultural Services). A lot of people came to the meeting. One was the new Blacktown police commander, Mark Wright.

Wright, who at the time was starting the initiative that would become Com4Unity, got straight to the point: what did the players need? Chagai said that all they needed was one evening on a basketball court, but at the PCYC in Blacktown the same officer always kicked them out. They also needed basketballs, as they had no money.

Wright said he would arrange a month's trial at the PCYC, for no charge. If there were fights or other troubles, they were out. But if the trial went well, police would extend it. When is this going to start, Chagai asked. "Right now," said Wright. And he, Biar, another Sudanese leader Mary Mamur, and the players left the meeting and walked through the streets of Blacktown to the PCYC, where Wright booked them in. Bekele then took them to Rebel Sport at Westpoint and bought them two basketballs.

The trial was a success. Wright and the Migrant Resource Centre helped the group secure a three-year grant from the Department of Immigration to pay four part-time salaries. Funding was found to feed children after they arrived from school, and a minibus to drive them to games. The club that would become Savannah Pride was born.

Ten years later, 23 Savannah Pride players have gone to play and study at high schools and universities in the United States. They include Chagai's nephew, Makur Jongkuch, who went this year to Navarro College in Texas. Another former player, Duop Reath, played in the Australian side at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Joe Mantegna, head coach of Blair Academy, a basketball boarding school in New Jersey, has said that Savannah Pride is "impacting more people than most of us ever do in a lifetime."

Yet after all this achievement, Savannah Pride's future is not secure. Since the federal funding ended, the club has relied on donations from supporters, subscriptions from the minority of parents who can afford them, sporadic government grants, the support of the PCYC, and the work of volunteers. Chagai worked as volunteer for many years until PCYC funded his salary. He still spends as a lot of time trying to raise money. If this club were in eastern Sydney there is no doubt it would be flush with cash. But this is Blacktown.

Another problem is Chagai himself. He is too central to the fate of the club. “It’s never good to have a single point of failure,” Wright says. This year he persuaded Chagai to delay a return to Sudan until the club created a coaching schedule in his absence. Chagai wants to spend time with his wife, Adol Aluker Achiek, whom he married five years ago, and their two boys, Thon and Chagai. Their father is working on visa papers to bring them all to Australia.

Chagai says Australia remains a “very tough” environment for South Sudanese people. “My culture is about community, about village life. In Australia, the material support is there but the moral support is not. You have got to figure things out for yourself, but it is very hard for people who have gone through big problems to do that on their own. Once they fall off that cliff, a lot of young men are committing suicide, or have mental health problems.”

Lorraine Landon, a sports manager and former NSW basketballer, has joined Wright on the board. The club has been invited by Basketball NSW and the Women’s World Cup to run a trial “dads and daughters” program focussing on South Sudanese families. Involving girls is a challenge, Chagai says.

“We are trying to build up, but Sudanese parents do not like their daughters playing sport, or being too long out of the house.” Chagai says Sudanese boys receive more public attention because their struggles have been more visible, but “a lot of girls are suffering mentally – they just hide it.”

It is nearly 5pm; most players have left. “Did you lock up?” Chagai asks one stayer. “Did you clean the equipment?” He hauls his bags to the car, and loads the boot. He has been here for 12 hours, and looks both exhausted and unbeaten.

Six years ago, he gave his club, then called Star Basketball, a new name. He wanted to honour the friends he had lost. He was the lucky one. He had survived the savannah. He wanted others to survive it, too.

“We share some fates with the wild animals,” he says. He still remembers watching the animals in Africa gather under the trees. “They just sit there together. We, too, are a group of people getting together -- as a group, as a family, as a pride.”

Photo by James Button | Makur Jongkuch and James Oeser

Arrival:

The Association of Bhutanese in Australia, Blacktown CBD

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Om Dunghel

Om Dhungel's story of his journey into Australian life holds a special place for Merryn Howell. "She is my godmother," he says, his eyes shining. "Every day I remember her."

Howell (whose surname at that time was Jones) was a Skilled Migrant Placement Officer with the New South Wales Government. Dhungel was a refugee from the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, where he had been head of Planning and Development at the Department of Telecommunications. In 2001, after three years in Australia, Dhungel completed an MBA at the University of Technology Sydney. Over the next six months, while packing shelves at Coles, he applied for 52 jobs in engineering and business administration, and received 52 rejections.

People, trying to offer sympathy, told him the problem was racism, or the fact that he was a refugee. Dhungel, losing heart, began to think he'd be packing shelves forever. But Howell did not believe any of that. Keep going, she insisted. You will get there.

After the 52nd rejection, she had an idea. She would conduct a mock job interview with Dhungel, and film it.

"I came in the next day and she was jumping up and down," Dhungel says, his eyes shining. "She said, 'Om, I've got it! You are looking down at my feet. Look at my face!'"

Dhungel had simply been observing Bhutanese custom, which sees looking directly at a person of higher rank as a mark of great disrespect. Believing now that his problem wasn't racism or being a refugee, Dhungel returned to the search. In no time he had two good job offers, the second an engineering-related role at Telstra. He stayed at the company for 10 years.

It wasn't only getting the job that gives Dhungel cause to remember Merryn Howell. It was her faith in him, and her refusal to let up until his strengths were seen. Dhungel has since then applied those lessons to every aspect of his life.

A small, finely built man, nearly 60, Dhungel now runs his own consulting and mentoring practice. He sits on multicultural advisory committees with Blacktown City Council and NSW Police, and on the board of the Asylum Seeker Centre. He was chair of SydWest Multicultural Services in Blacktown, and lives in an elegant but not exclusive estate near the

Blacktown CBD. “I’m a Blacktown boy,” he says with a laugh, and with pride.

He was once a boy from Bhutan, from a Nepalese family that lived in a village in the south of the Himalayan kingdom. His parents, Durga and Damanta, ran a grocery at the market, but their son was educated well, and rose into the high ranks of the public service. He had conversations with the king.

People of Nepalese ethnicity had lived in Bhutan in large numbers for more than a hundred years. But many ethnic Bhutanese thought their numbers were growing too fast, and feared being overtaken. A movement grew: One Nation, One People. From the late 1980s, the regime began a campaign to expel the Nepalese. Durga was accused of supporting insurgents, arrested and tortured till he passed out. When the family left, they lost everything.

By 1996, there were 100,000 Nepalese-Bhutanese refugees in camps in Nepal. Dhungel, his wife, Saroja, and young daughter, Smriti, lived in the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu, so that he could advocate to the Nepalese on behalf of the refugees. While Saroja worked as a health aide, Dhungel worked as a full time but unpaid human rights activist, and co-edited a newspaper, The Bhutan Review, that sought to draw the world’s attention to the plight of his people. He delivered it by walking to every embassy in Kathmandu, often carrying Smriti on his back. Those six years in exile, in which he learnt to live with virtually nothing, were the most important and formative of his life.

The camps that housed the Bhutanese were poor but, unlike those in Kenya and Ethiopia that housed many South Sudanese, they were in the main not violent. There were divisions and some of these were bitter: some people wanted to take up arms to try to regain their land in Bhutan; others said they had to renounce that dream.

Most agreed on two things: they would continue to press for their return to Bhutan, and they would do everything to educate their children. They opened schools under palm trees, and they waited. Some waited for more than 15 years.

In the late 2000s the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees embarked on a concerted effort to clear the camps with the help of eight Western nations. Australia agreed to take 5500 of the 100,000 refugees. In 2008, Dhungel had been in Sydney for 10 years. The Australian Bhutanese community he belonged to numbered precisely 17 people.

To prepare for the newcomers, Dhungel and others formed the Association of Bhutanese in Australia (ABA). They also struck an unusual informal agreement with ACL, the provider of federally-funded settlement services to the Bhutanese, and with an ACL manager, Jill Gillespie.

The government spends about $500 million a year on programs to support refugees. Half of that money goes to the Adult Migrant English Program, but other services help refugees to find a house, a school, a doctor, or specialist services such as counselling for torture and trauma.

Typically, these services are provided as a form of welfare, with the recipients having no role. But Gillespie and Dhungel agreed it would be far better if the Bhutanese could have a hand in their own settlement. When people began arriving from the camps in 2008, the Dhungel family and other Bhutanese would be waiting at Sydney Airport.

They would drive the families to rented places, often in Blacktown. They would show the adults how to work electric lights and flush toilets, and how not to get burnt by the hot tap. People were scared to turn on stoves after an Australian Government orientation in the camps had warned them not to trigger smoke alarms. Dhungel remembers he and his wife buying more than 50 rice cookers and giving them to families as gifts. They also left food, especially vegetables such as chokos and rayo saag, a spinach that grows in Bhutan, in the fridge.

As people continued to arrive, the ABA developed a plan to identify their skills and put them to use. Many had never been to formal school, and could not even read Nepali. In partnership with an employment services provider, MTC Australia, the ABA created a Spoken English School in Blacktown, run by volunteers from the community. Young Bhutanese were engaged to cut hair, do basic repair of computers and phones, or fix a tap. Others ran workshops on resume writing and interview skills. A man organised a group to take part in Blacktown's Clean Up Australia Day, to "showcase our sincerity and commitment to the nation."

Every Friday, the community held a seniors' get-together with a yoga class at SydWest Multicultural Services in Blacktown. On weekends, Dhungel would pick up children from their homes and drive them to sport. One teenager, Hemanta Acharya, having spent the first 15 years of her life in a camp, played soccer for Australia in the 2010 Football for Hope Festival in South Africa, 18 months after arriving in the country.

For many people, especially women, gaining a driver's licence was the key to independence. Three women set up child care centres, an opportunity that would not have come their way in Bhutan.

All these efforts came together in a monthly event in a hall in Blacktown. The Council provided the hall rent-free for 18 months, until the ABA offered to pay its own way. Jill Gillespie remembers people being brought up on stage to share an achievement. One would hold up a Year 11 certificate, another an L plate, to great applause. Gillespie says "these successes, however little they might seem in the broader sense of life, were all celebrated."

Gillespie says "the amount of time Om gave to the community in those early days was beyond my comprehension. He had a full-time job at Telstra!" She thinks the Bhutanese leaders "were smart cookies. They could see the value of early intervention to minimise problems down the track."

There were problems: episodes of domestic violence and depression, some suicides. Some people struggled to learn English or find jobs; others regretted a lack of contact with the wider Australian community. Nevertheless, a survey from 2019 showed that very few people who were eligible to work or learn were not doing so. More than 60 per cent of families own their homes. Those who couldn't afford to buy left Sydney for more affordable places such as Adelaide, the largest Bhutanese centre, and Albury-Wodonga. In 2015 Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton singled out the Bhutanese for "supporting each other to quickly gain employment and independent living."

But over time, Dhungel has come to feel that Australian policy towards refugees is discouraging that opportunity for independence. He says that settlement services, by being run as a form of social welfare, are not nurturing the strengths of individuals or of their community.

Under the current model, large providers compete for lucrative government contracts to deliver services to refugees. The more contracts a provider wins, the more it grows. To deliver the contract, it hires lots of specialist staff. Dhungel says these employees, often young and well-meaning, are required to undertake a "needs analysis" of the community, then to develop programs based on those perceived needs. Providers are not even required to engage with communities, simply to deliver the service.

Dhungel says providers are not acting in bad faith; they have to meet government funding requirements and other performance indicators. Yet he says their focus on refugees' perceived weaknesses and needs, rather than their strengths, is breeding a culture of dependency. And by not engaging with communities, they are spending resources on tasks that communities could do themselves, learning valuable skills along the way.

This is one man's view, yet it is not a lone one. Hazara, Khmer and South Sudanese organisations all testified to the Senate's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee that the move from a community-based funding model to one dominated by large service providers had been damaging. The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, which works with many communities, told the inquiry that some activities "are much better run by refugee organisations themselves." The Committee's report, Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia, was published in February, 2021.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Om Dunghel

Even the constant use of the term, refugee, to denote need frustrates Dhungel. “The sector champions its work with the most vulnerable but refugees are not vulnerable. They have often lived for long times without food, or divided one mango between two families. The service sector could strengthen communities by helping to build an array of champions within them, then step back to let communities do things by themselves. They don’t need charity, they need inspiration.”

Dhungel believes the possibility of inspiration is abundant in Australia. Flick a switch, and the light comes on. If a road gets a pothole, it is paved. People died in the Snowy Mountains so others could have power. His father, Durga, whose experience of torture made him fear people in uniforms, went on a tour of Blacktown Police Station. The commander, Mark Wright, invited him to sit in his chair. Sometimes Dhungel cannot believe the blessings of this country.

I ask him whether he thinks Blacktown is coming together or apart as a community. “Based on my experience, I think it’s coming together,” he says.

His evidence? During the pandemic a group of leaders from Bhutanese, South Sudanese, Sri Lankan, Indian, Sierra Leone and Afghan background met to discuss what they could do together to combat isolation and loneliness in their communities. This year, Blacktown Mosque invited about 30 non-Muslim leaders to the iftar to celebrate Eid, the end of Ramadan.

Community festivals increasingly involve people from other groups.

And just the other day, a group of 10 Bhutanese of different ages got together to discuss how their community was going. A few lamented that the common bond they felt when they arrived in Australia had gone. People were working, studying and staying in their own friendship groups; fewer came to community events, that first rapture had been lost. One person asked: “How do we get back to 2008?”

But other people replied: the reason our Bhutanese gatherings are smaller is that people are socialising in the wider community. They play sport with other Australians. Many Bhutanese -- more males than females – are nurses, and they are having drinks, joining Facebook groups with their workmates, and buying homes. One person said: “This is such a good problem to have.”

I say to Dhungel that maintaining such cohesion relies on forces that are bigger than the Bhutanese: above all, the strength of the economy, the guarantee of getting a job. He is reluctant to entirely allow the point. “There is always something you can do,” he says. “What can we as a community do? We can’t always rely on the government to help us.”

He tells another story. A settlement service provider hired him to host a camping trip near Wollongong for a group of 26 recently arrived refugees from Syria, Iraq and other countries as part of a community capacity building program. On the first night, Dhungel asked each person to stand up and speak about themselves. When some began in Arabic, Dhungel would say, "No, let's try in English. If you speak in Arabic, you have two minutes. If you speak in English, you have 10." That got a laugh.

One older man, who had been a professor of engineering design in Syria, was visibly nervous. He asked to speak in Arabic; Dhungel gently encouraged him to speak in English. Speaking very slowly, in English, the man told his story, and told it well.

As the group got ready for bed, he approached Dhungel. "I have been a professor for 30 years, and I've been in this country 18 months. I have never before stood up and spoken in English in front of a crowd," he said. "Thank you."

On the way back to Blacktown Dhungel called Smriti, his daughter. Could she investigate getting the man registered as a designer? He might have added: "There is always something we can do."

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Democracy:

The Filipino Saturday School and the local MP's office

Photo by James Button | Jade Cadelina

Jade Cadelina (introduced on page 28 of this narrative) migrated from the Philippines in 1977, when he was nine years old. Since then, he had given little thought to the culture of his birthplace. But about ten years ago, his teenage son, Michael, and daughter, Nicole, started asking him questions.

Where were you born, Dad? Where do we come from? What language does lolo (grandfather in Tagalog) speak? Nicole, who has never been to the Philippines, began learning Tagalog.

"I was confused myself, trying to answer their questions," Cadelina says. "I realised there were things I needed to learn. My kids got me back to my own culture."

Cadelina now runs Blacktown's Filipino Saturday School, which teaches Tagalog and aspects of Filipino culture to about 20 primary and secondary students, along with a few older Anglo husbands of Filipinos. Five years ago he also joined the Blacktown Council Multicultural Advisory Committee. For a man who had never been much involved in politics, it has been an eye opener.

"I get to see how other community leaders work and I learn from them," he says. People like Nalika Padmasena, a solicitor and 2020 president of the Sri Lankan Association of NSW, and a powerful actor for her community, Cadelina believes. He thinks Filipinos have lacked such a voice, and lost out as a result.

In the past, Filipinos have not been seen as a group overly concerned with maintaining a distinct culture in Australia. The Catholic Church, in which many Filipinos are invested, has tended to discourage separate identities. But Cadelina has come to believe that both in Australia and in the Philippines, the Filipino national culture is disappearing, and he wants to play his part in preserving it.

In Blacktown, "we still don't have a community centre, a place where we can practise traditional dances," he says. "Filipinos have a lot of catching up to do. There's a power struggle within an influential faction of Filipino community leaders who assume that other ethnic groups were able to get that temple because they learnt how to suck up to people. That's wrong. The Sri Lankans learnt the planning approval process. They learnt how to get an organisation registered, how to talk to the government.

They also have a great sense of how to interact with people outside of their community. I admire them for that."

Politics everywhere comes in layers, and they are all visible in Blacktown. There is competition for funding and other resources. There are fights for political office: who gets elected to what, to represent whom? And there are contests of ideas -- what kind of society do we want to live in?

Blacktown's growing migrant populations have generated an array of organisations, including at least 30 Saturday language schools, from Punjabi to Polish, Turkish to Tamil. There are Anglo-Indian and Super Sikh cricket clubs and a Darug netball club, Didjurigur. There are at least three Filipino senior citizens associations. The Harman Foundation and Indian Sub-Continent Crisis and Support Agency work to support victims of domestic violence. The Sinhala Saturday School posts on Facebook that it is running a sausage sizzle at Bunnings to raise funds. Everyone needs money.

Many communities are now focussing on their ageing populations; the Hungarians and Maltese have established facilities for the elderly, and other groups want to follow suit. As Greenway MP Michelle Rowland says, an elderly Hindi woman is not going to be happy in an aged-care home that serves beef or doesn't have statues of deities in the corner of the common room.

The problem is that in Blacktown, money, facilities and now even land are in short supply, says Rowland. "Every ethnic group wants their own hall – 'my hall!' That is not going to happen."

Professor Andrew Jakubowicz, a specialist in migration at the University of Technology Sydney, has studied the involvement of migrant communities in politics. He makes two critical points relevant to Blacktown. The first is that the unique nature of Australian multiculturalism – with many different communities and no dominant one or two – has been a boon to integration, since it encourages groups to mingle with others rather than interact mainly within one large population. The downside for these communities is that, unlike in some other countries, they will struggle to gain parliamentary representation on the basis of their numbers alone.

Instead, creating more diverse parliaments will depend on the actions of the political parties. Leading for Change, a report published by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2018, showed that 19 per cent of the population, but only 4 per cent of federal MPs, had non-European ancestry.

Jakubowicz's second point is that entering Australian politics will be easier for some groups than for others. Indians, in particular, come to Australia from a democracy with British government traditions and they speak English. In recent years, Livingston Chettipally, Raman Bhalla and Susai Benjamin, all Indian-born,

have contested federal and state elections in the Blacktown LGA for the two main parties, so far without success.

Change is easier to see at the local government level. Ed Husic, federal MP for the seat of Chifley, tells a story about Charlie Lowles, a Liverpool migrant who was mayor of Blacktown for six years, in the 1990s and 2000s, and was colloquially known as "the mayor of Mount Druitt." Lowles was a highly effective local politician who found the funds to get Mount Druitt a swimming pool, a hospital upgrade, and paving for the potholed driveway of the soccer pitch and so on. When he died in 2016, nearly a thousand people came to his funeral at the Holy Family Catholic Church.

Lowles married a Filipino and was much loved in that community, Husic says. But when Filipinos said to him decades ago that their community was now so big they should get a Filipino onto council, Lowles would say, "It doesn't matter if I'm white, black or brown, what matters is that I can deliver for you. We do things on the basis of who can do the job." Husic says: "It's no disrespect to Charlie but politics and global change have just overtaken that view. The whole representation thing has become so significant."

Blacktown Council has long been a Labor stronghold, run by men who a mayor from another council described to me as "old, white, Labor Right, not woke." A woman has never been mayor. But population change is driving political change. Husic says: "Liberals would pre-select a Filipino, then Filipinos in the Labor Party would say, 'Hang on a second…'. You can see where this is going."

Sure enough, the Council elected in 2016 included five Filipinos, four of them Liberals, three of them from the family of lawyer and long-time mayoral aspirant, Jess Diaz. Blacktown also elected its first Sikh, and now has two Indian-born councillors, both Labor. Half of the 14 councillors come from non-European backgrounds. After long decades of Anglo-Celtic dominance, Blacktown became "one of Sydney's most multicultural councils," according to The Blacktown Advocate.

But it is in the office of the local MP that the organised political preoccupations of communities are most on show. When I spoke to Husic, he had that morning received a Filipino senior citizens group worried about facilities for the elderly, and a group of Indian Muslims concerned about changes to Australia's citizenship laws, the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and what they saw as growing extremism within the Hindu community.

That last issue also troubles Sikhs in Blacktown. On Sunday 14 February a crowd of about 400 people had gathered at the gurdwara. Many people had come to watch Mohan Singh Sekon's attempt to become the world's fastest onion chopper and enter the Guinness Book of Records. The 77-year old Sydney man peeled and chopped more than 47 kilos of onions in an hour without losing a finger, but that turned out not to be the day's biggest drama.

Around 4.30pm, police told the gurdwara manager, Ravi Singh, that a convoy of cars sporting Indian flags was heading towards the temple. The convoy had reportedly driven from a demonstration of Hindu nationalists in Mays Hill, near Parramatta. Singh called his local MP, Michelle Rowland, who called the police. A few hundred young men gathered outside the gurdwara, ready to defend it, but police blocked the convoy before it got there.

Singh told SBS Punjabi radio that the rally of "mobsters" intended to disrupt religious services and damage the building. The rally's chief organiser, Yogesh Khattar, told the same program that the rally never intended to go near the gurdwara; such claims were "mischievous and false." Chief Inspector Adam Philips told the Indian-Australian news website, Indian Link, that police had stopped the rally because it "was simply going to aggravate the current situation between the two communities." The gurdwara has hired overnight security guards for the first time.

Hindus and Sikhs generally get along in Australia; evidence of conflict is scarce, and few Hindus in this country seem fired up by rising nationalism in their birthplace. In India, however, current tensions turn on the attempt of the Modi Government to introduce laws that would open agriculture to greater competition. Protestors, many of whom are Sikh farmers, say the laws would reduce farmers to poverty in favour of big agribusinesses. These protests are triggering an aggressive response by some Hindu nationalists and supporters of Narendra Modi's BJP party, and this conflict has touched Australia.

In late February, a car containing four Sikh men, some of whom had attended a farm laws protest, was attacked in Harris Park. The men managed to escape their assailants, who carried hammers and wooden bats, but in a separate incident, a Sikh man walking through Harris Park was bashed. An Indian-born man has been charged in relation to that assault.

Late last year, the Australian Sikh Association asked Rowland whether she would make a statement about the farmers protests. Rowland, who has Hindu and Sikh communities in her electorate, made a statement to Parliament that did not take sides but noted the "deep concerns of the constituents I represent." She called for reforms to bring people along through dialogue. She says she invariably makes the same point to communities: "March about whatever you want, but peaceful streets cannot be made places of violence."

Ed Husic says he is an optimist about these issues. "The communities have gotten along better over time. I see it." A Muslim of Bosnian ancestry, Husic is invited to Serbian functions in his electorate, and willingly attends. In the main, the hatreds of the old world have not come here, he says. "I think people feel a genuine sense of relief that in Australia they can start over."

Not all conflicts are easy to resolve, though. Blacktown is a crucible for the clash between religious and secular values.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

During the period of the same-sex marriage plebiscite in 2017, Husic met with a group from a local mosque. One of them said, "Of course you're going to vote against this same-sex marriage thing." Husic said no, he was not. "They all looked at me and they said, 'But you're Muslim.'"

Yes he was, Husic replied, but he also represented his whole community."'I don't believe that the laws of the land should allow the majority to work out how a minority should live their lives.' And they said, 'But this is not right,' and I said, 'OK, I'm going to say this to you again: if in France they decide that the hijab shouldn't be worn in public because the majority says so, would you be comfortable with that?' A lot of the older guys didn't get me but the young imam got me straight away. I said, 'You've been persecuted at home and I've stood up for you.' And on it went. I don't think they were happy."

Husic says that people of other faiths, including Catholics, made the same point to him. At the same time, "I still see social media people go 'Well, Ed Husic's a moderate Muslim but does he stop people from saying terrible things in his community, in his faith, against people who are homosexual?' It was difficult, I'm not lying to you."

Just 17 of 150 Australian electorates voted no to same sex-marriage. Nine of them, all held by Labor, were in Western Sydney, and they included the three seats that cover Blacktown. In the 2019 federal election, Labor suffered significant swings against it across Western Sydney, although it lost only one seat there. After the election, Labor's Chris Bowen, whose seat of McMahon includes a small southern wedge of Blacktown, said that many religious voters told him they no longer felt that Labor spoke for people of faith.

But it is not clear that the same-sex marriage decision had much impact on the result. After all, most Liberal MPs also supported it. David Borger, executive director of the Western Sydney Business Chamber and a former state Labor minister, told a reporter that swings against Labor in Western Sydney were less about faith than about material concerns. With so much housing and economic development in the region, Labor's tax reform plan made people nervous, he said.

Blacktown remains strongly Labor overall, yet in the past decade the Liberal Party briefly gained its first majority on Council, and it holds one state seat in the north of the LGA. In the 2019 federal election Ed Husic suffered a swing against him of nearly 7 per cent, although his seat is safe. At the edges, at least, Blacktown is turning blue.

If Blacktown and Western Sydney are more in the political play than they used to be, this could be good for Blacktown, which has probably suffered from being seen by Labor as impregnable and by the Liberals as unwinnable. It is also a potentially good sign for Australian democracy.

In the wake of Donald Trump's election as US president, the Republican Party has been seized by the idea that it can no longer win by appealing to minority communities and the vast diversity of America. Instead, most Republicans are making an explicit, race-based appeal to the white majority, a decision that threatens the future of the nation. To date, Australia has avoided going down that road.

In giving everyone a say, democracy forces people to contend with ideas and people they don't like. Sometimes they even have to enter the same room and try to find common ground. That's the power and the beauty of it.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun | Michelle Rowland

Building:

The R2 Residents Association, Marsden Park

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

Another expression of democracy in Blacktown is the R2 Residents Association, a lively, diverse group that is calling on state and federal governments to do more to build transport links, schools and other infrastructure in the North West Growth Area, where its members live. One active member of the association is Mariam Latifi.

Latifi, a teacher at a Parramatta primary school, is building a home in the new Elara estate in Marsden Park with her husband and three daughters, all aged under five. She is one of those young people who seem never to stop. Before having children, she taught full-time while running five Saturday Afghan language schools for 200 students, the largest being in Blacktown. On maternity leave, she started a Master's in teaching English as a second language.

Although the family has not yet moved into Elara, Latifi already runs a children's playgroup on the estate, and has organised a Community Clean Up Day, a Harmony Day, and an Australia's Biggest Morning Tea to raise funds for cancer treatment. "I feel I am in love with the Elara community," she says.

Elara can certainly use her help. The estate already houses about 10,000 people, with an estimated 30,000 likely to come in the next 15 years. Until this year it had one road exit, and residents going to work sometimes took half an hour merely to get out of the estate. Sixty per cent of Elara residents commute to the Sydney CBD, another 15 per cent to Parramatta, according to a Council survey. Most say they would prefer to take public transport, but driving to the closest train station, Riverstone, can take at least 20 minutes, after which one city train comes every 30 minutes for an hour-long journey.

Infrastructure is also lacking. A primary school opened in Elara this year as a 'pop-up' on a building site, and already has 800 enrolments. A big part of the problem, according to Council CEO Kerry Robinson, is that in 2010 the government abolished a levy that required developers to build neighbourhood centres, libraries and swimming pools on estates such as Elara. Ed Husic has described the North West Growth Area as Sydney's "Bermuda Triangle. Homes get built, people move in, then they get completely forgotten."

A great risk is that rapid population growth accompanied by inadequate infrastructure and job opportunities will leave unhappy communities in its wake. While the pandemic's long-term impact on migration remains unclear, the Federal Government predicts that from 2024, it will return to pre-COVID levels.

Under that scenario, economic geographer Phillip O'Neill calculates that even on optimistic figures for job growth in Western Sydney, by 2036 more than half a million commuters will have to leave the region to work every day. "Imagine, as is currently the case for Western Sydney, around 75 per cent of this outflow of workers using cars as their means of travel. Such a situation would be seen as planning madness."

These things worry Mariam Latifi, but she is an optimist, and she wants Elara to thrive. When I asked why she was working so hard to bring the estate together, she told me a story.

Her family migrated from Afghanistan when she was six. As she grew older, she felt increasingly comfortable as an Australian: "I love my barbecue, I love my footy, I love watching the (Parramatta) Eels." But in Year 8, she decided to put on the hijab. Her mother did not wear it, and her sisters still do not, but the September 11 attacks on the United States had just taken place. Latifi says she was appalled by the attacks, but also felt a need to defend her faith. "I got emotional: why are they being mean to my religion? This is not what Islam is about."

When she was 14, she took a job as a sales assistant at a Woolworths in Parramatta. It wasn't an easy time to work a checkout wearing a veil. "People would throw their things down, point at a newspaper, and say, 'You people are in the paper again.' Two young ladies said, 'Why are you Muslims doing this?'"

Mariam felt anxious, but she also wanted to talk. "Thank you for asking," she would begin. "I utterly condemn what they are doing. It's barbaric." She would try to tell them about Islam. It was a peaceful religion, terrorism had no place in it, she said. Sometimes she would quote the Quran verse: "Whosoever kills a person, it shall be as if he has killed all mankind, and whosoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he has saved the life of all mankind."

Not everyone softened their stance. But quite a few did. She laughs: "There was a long queue at my checkout. These two older ladies, true blue Aussies, would always talk to me." The women had been among the hostile ones at first. Now they told Latifi they had never met a Muslim before. "We love your face and friendly service," they said. Other customers would snap at Latifi's antagonists: "Just go another cashier if you don't want to be served by a Muslim."

Latifi says: "I started to realise how many different types of people there are. I'll never forget that time. The power of communication is so important."

The day after our interview, I texted Latifi to say I was visiting Elara. She replied quickly, with a list of sights: “our very own shopping centre, finally being built after a very long time… And beautiful parks like Livvi's Place and the big oval next to it. There is also a Limestone Cafe next to the Community Hub.”

Elara’s houses run in uniform rows; each pushes out to the edge of its block. They have an equally pristine air, undistinguished yet by any idiosyncrasies of taste. The saplings planted along the roads are all the same height. A car cruises down a curving drive, past a parked bulldozer and a boy slouching home in a blue uniform and heavy bag. Women push prams while talking on phones --mobile mums. A sign says: Please drive slowly, families live here. Journalists often liken such places to The Truman Show, yet they also have an atmosphere of hope and beginning.

On the other side of the six lanes of Richmond Road is Marsden Park Public School. Its gum trees are fully grown, and there is native bush to the north. Four years ago this was a country school with 67 students. Today it has 526, and 15 demountable classrooms. Luckily the Rural Fire Brigade is next door: in coming years, it’s going to get hot out here. Nearby Penrith is often 10 degrees hotter than central Sydney in summer.

To the west, a canyon of white and grey cloud masses in the darkening sky, streaking red and orange down over the blue mountains. Despite the encroachment of houses, billboards, asphalt, fences and traffic, out here nature is still mighty. And the humans keep coming.

You haven't been to Australia

till you've been to Blacktown

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

I ask Peter Filmer, the events manager at Blacktown Council, how the Anglo-Celtic community he grew up in had responded to migration. “Not always well,” he says. “But so many of them have died now.”

Bishop Vincent Long told me that the Church chose Blacktown as the place in which to locate its Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations because it felt that public attitudes to Muslims might be “more adversarial” there. The centre was established after a 15-year old Islamist and ISIS supporter murdered a Parramatta police employee in 2015.

But the limited polling data that exist do not suggest that attitudes to minority groups in Blacktown are strikingly different from the rest of Australia. For example, polling for the Social Atlas of Australia in 2014 found that lack of acceptance of other cultures in Blacktown was less than 4 per cent. Nevertheless, about one in five people reported an experience of discrimination over the previous year, and this figure was higher for some groups. These findings are similar to findings about acceptance and discrimination for Australia at large.

Moreover, Blacktown’s diversity creates a highly complicated picture, with inter-group relations that follow few predictable patterns. When I ask Christine Cawsey if there is racism at Rooty Hill High School, she thinks for a moment: “Look, every so often, but not much…most kids are pretty good.”

She has a few students from white supremacist families, some of them from northern European backgrounds. They are “generally pretty anti-Jewish, pretty much anti-everybody really.” But during the recent Israel-Palestine conflict, these students, to bait Muslims at the school, will “just flip and be anti-Arab.” (She was pleased that students from Middle Eastern backgrounds argued for listening to both sides of the Middle Eastern debate before taking one.)

But Cawsey says that what adults might see as racism is often just “conflict between kids.” She tells a story about three boys, all of non-white backgrounds. A mother of one rang the school and said her son had been treated in an offensive and racist manner by the other two, whom she thought were his friends. The deputy principal got the boys in and said he was very concerned about this allegation of racism. All three looked confused. One said, “Sir, we don't know what you mean.” Another said, “Sir, can I tell you what really happened?

We just had to tell him: he was being a…" The boy used a word not quite fit for print, but essentially a colloquial term for very annoying.

More than racism, Cawsey worries about educational inequality affecting her students' lives. When she taught at Bidwill High School in Mount Druitt in the 1980s, students would send job applications with a return address at a teacher's house, or at the house of an aunt who lived elsewhere in Sydney. The students believed -- with reason, Cawsey says -- that sending an application from Mount Druitt's postcode, 2770, would guarantee no response. Some Rooty Hill High students do the same today.

Cawsey adds: "Controversially, I think the proliferation of low-fee, non-government schools is going to threaten that sense of community we have in Blacktown. When I first came here, almost every student went to their local community school unless they went to a selective school or an elite private. Now communities are quite divided by education, and if you send your children to a public school, you spend your life defending that decision. I do think it's something that governments haven't understood."

Mount Druitt, which contains some of Australia's most disadvantaged urban areas, now has 47 non-government schools. The largest share is Catholic, but there are also Islamic, Anglican, Coptic Orthodox and Pentecostal schools. Some of these schools are ethnically and culturally diverse, some are not. The Sikh grammar school, due to open in 2024 and open to students from all cultural backgrounds, states that it aspires to assist young people from the Indian community to join the ranks of Australia's judges, media, members of parliament, national sporting teams, and winners of national and international prizes, including the Nobel Prize. Such achievements should be celebrated if they occur, yet it is a sign of the cutthroat competitiveness of contemporary Australian society that growing numbers of parents no longer pursue such goals through the local high school.

Michael Chaaya, the husband of Greenway MP Michelle Rowland, also grew up in Mount Druitt, in public housing. "He could not speak English on his first day at school, he ran away," Rowland says. "But he had teachers who took an interest in him, thought he had something. He went to Sydney University, got first-class honours in law and economics." Chaaya is a senior lawyer today. Rowland says: "We can't be leaving these things to chance -- to one good teacher in a primary school."

Growing inequality falls heavily on places such as Blacktown. Globalisation and technological change has created an economy with jobs at the top and bottom ends, and a hollowed-out middle. Much of the manufacturing and clerical work that once guaranteed secure lives to many Australians, including migrants, has gone. In its place is the cold contest of the modern labor market, with high rewards for education and high costs for those who miss out.

Yet if life can be unfair in Blacktown, people keep coming up with ways to create a better life. How can their work be better supported?

When Tony Hunter and Melinda Bonham set up Marrin Weejali to fight drug and alcohol addiction in the Indigenous community, they were not outsiders coming in with a plan. Hunter had been an alcoholic and suffered incalculable loss and pain before he found a way out. He then wanted to share what he had learnt with his own people in Mount Druitt. Mayor Chagai created Savannah Pride out of his life experience: his harrowing journey through the savannah of Africa, the camps of Ethiopia and Kenya and the streets of Sydney. The Sikhs who built the gurdwara and the community around it drew over many years on their own strengths and resources, their chardi kala, the mind state that meets adversity with stubborn optimism and joy. The philosophy underpinning the work of the Australian Bhutanese Association grew out of what Om Dhungel and others learnt through years in refugee camps: people are strong, even – perhaps especially -- when they have nothing left but life and gratitude for life.

These organisations were built within communities, from the ground up, by leaders who wanted to pass on what they had learnt. All were built in response to an urgent need. Similarly, the Com4Unity program was created not to acquit a funding grant but because a police officer and others had a serious problem. To solve it, they saw that they had to involve the people most affected by it, the youth of Blacktown.

These organisations lack the funds that would flow naturally to them if they existed in wealthier parts of town. Savannah Pride has been feted in the home of basketball, the United States, yet Mayor Chagai spends his days trying to raise money to keep it alive. Com4Unity did not survive. Marrin Weejali, always short of funds, battles to grow to meet a massive need in the Indigenous community.

The problem, apart from postcode prejudice, is that these initiatives are small and don't comfortably fit the standard funding model. Under that model, non-government providers bid to deliver services to address a problem that government has already delineated and defined, and pre-determined what success would look like in tackling it. The procurement process is usually competitive, and organisations bidding for the work must show a track record of success, with mature systems to manage finances, staff, data collection, risk, and so on.

The welfare, social service and migrant settlement organisations that thrive in this process tend to be big, with a business model tightly focused on further growth through winning more government contracts. The result is a standardised and top-down approach to solving problems in communities – one that often cuts out the ideas, knowledge and energy of the communities themselves, as Om Dhungel argues.

Meanwhile, organisations such as the ones identified in this report struggle for resources that would better enable them to draw on their wisdom, life experience, and commitment to the communities they serve and love.

Governments are right to insist on accountability for funds and performance. But can they also find ways to better support local ideas and innovation in places such as Blacktown?

I spoke with Clement Meru, a community engagement and disability services manager at SydWest Multicultural Services, Meru said, with a kind of sadness often expressed by South Sudanese people, that many in his community, especially the young, did not always feel welcome in Australia. Although good things are happening, such as more people playing in mixed sporting teams, he sees a big gap remaining between his community and the mainstream. He has an idea to bridge it.

Meru thinks there are many people of goodwill in the community who would like to meet refugees and migrants but limited ways to do so. Current programs that focus on social cohesion and settlement do not address the problem effectively. "English conversation classes, excursions, language support – these are all good but not very helpful in building a local community," he said. "People interact within their own communities. This is their comfort zone. On weekends, they attend church in their own language. People from the mainstream community are not involved in Refugee Week, Harmony Day. Multicultural festivals are for multicultural communities. It's us and them. We need to shift that."

Meru plans to create "a Neighbourhood Buddies project" to introduce locals to new arrivals. The locals could advise on navigating the school system, finding work, even how to run a lawnmower. From that beginning, friendships would form. Last year SydWest secured some federal funds for the initiative through a consortium of settlement providers but funding constraints prevented its launch. However, Meru intends to keep his plan alive. "I think it's the only way we can move forward together."

I heard many versions of Meru's idea in Blacktown. To build a community, people need to meet. Not online, not through the dark glass of social media, but face to face. John Laffan stood every day outside his school gate. Rosie Kaur Bhatti walked into a school principal's office to right a wrong, but also to explain that it's not a blaming game, it's an understanding game.

Mariam Latifi confronted her antagonists, respectfully, at a supermarket checkout. Mark Wright brought everyone with a stake in a problem around the same table, a banal idea on paper that proved so rich in practice. The healing work of Tony Hunter's organisation starts with a handshake; his own life might have been saved by a hug.

Blacktown is the place of the meeting, the encounter. It might be a fist or a hand. Sometimes the fist unclenches and the hand extends. Blacktown exposes great and growing differences in power and opportunity in our society, the great injustice of that. But it also reveals that, contrary to fashionable theories forged in more comfortable worlds, we are not locked into fixed identities based on race, culture or creed. We can be prejudiced or decent, prejudiced and decent. Our motivations are endlessly complex, and they can change.

Of course, we can't all meet. But we can tell and hear stories. As much mainstream media have grown weaker and less influential, they have increasingly shrunk their coverage to the inner cities and circles of power. We don't hear much from places like Blacktown. Instead, a fly-in-fly-out approach can create simplistic narratives. I heard from a number of people in Blacktown, for example, that while there had been conflict between young Sudanese and Islander men, the story on the ground was more complicated, involving more groups and shifting alliances and tensions, than most media stories allowed. Similarly, I found that much academic research involving Blacktown seemed to come with a pre-arranged theoretical framework that the words and stories of interview subjects were made to fit.

Photo by Adam Hollingworth / Hired Gun

We need to find ways to help Blacktown and places like it tell their own story in their own words, and respond to their own problems in their own ways. A story that has inspired Om Dhungel, for example, is one proposed by Indigenous leader Noel Pearson, among others. Dhungel calls it a three-story nation, built on an Indigenous foundation, British institutions, and migration from all over the world. These three stories, which can come together to create a shared idea of community and belonging, all resonate deeply in Blacktown.

In the past 70 years or so, nearly 400,000 migrants of all kinds have moved onto this plain between the mountains and the sea. They built homes, institutions and meeting places. They tried to get an education or get their children one, and they created places in which they could breathe and live. This Blacktown story goes back to the coming of the Europeans, and to one Australian who travelled further than any other, although in her whole life she did not move more than a short distance from her birthplace. She made the most of her education. She fought for a piece of land. She fought for her children. She was all Blacktown.

She was born in 1805, into the Boorooberongal clan of the Darug people, probably on the floodplain of the Hawkesbury River. Contact with white settlers in her childhood might help to explain why she came to speak English so well. Her Darug name is lost; we know her as Maria Lock.

Her father, Yarramundi, was known as 'chief of the Richmond tribes.' But within two decades of the First Fleet landing, three Darug elders had come to Governor King to seek protection from advancing settlers as they forcibly took possession of the river banks. As killings and mass deaths from disease intensified, Yarramundi handed over his young daughter to be educated at the Native Institution, then located in Parramatta. Whether Yarramundi did this willingly is not clear; he must have done it with sorrow.

Five years later, in 1819, the Sydney Gazette reported that an Aboriginal girl had won first prize in the school examinations, ahead of 20 children from the Institution and almost 100 European students.

Her achievement, the newspaper wrote, challenged "an erroneous opinion which had long prevailed with many, namely, that the Aborigines of this country were insusceptible of any mental improvement which could adapt them to the purposes of civilized association." That girl was almost certainly Maria.

In 1823, the Native Institution moved from Parramatta to what is now the corner of Richmond Road and Rooty Hill Road North in Blacktown. Enrolments were poor, and it was abandoned in 1833. By then, Maria was married to a convict, Robert Lock, transported to Australia for stealing a pig, who had helped to build the Native Institution. It was the first officially sanctioned marriage between an Aboriginal woman and a convict; moreover, Robert, as a convict, was assigned to Maria's supervision.

After the wedding, the couple settled on four acres of land next to the Native Institution. They had nine children who survived to adulthood. He died in 1854; she died in 1878 and was buried in a churchyard beside him. She left her children a relatively large amount of land, some of which stayed in the family until the Aborigines Protection Board took it away in 1920. The official record of her death stated: 'Last of the Aboriginals from Blacktown.' But there are families in Blacktown today who trace their descent back to her.

We have no biography of Maria Lock; these are the bones of her story. What did she feel about her husband, about the Europeans, about the calamity that befell her people? How did she cross the divide between two irreconcilable ways of life?

History, said the writer, Milan Kundera, is the thin thread of memory stretched out over the ocean of what has been forgotten.

We do know that at the time of her marriage, Maria had been promised 'a small Grant of Land and a Cow as a Marriage Portion'. She got the cow, but not the land, perhaps because a neighbour fiercely objected. But Maria was not beaten. In 1831 she petitioned Governor Darling seeking the grant of 30 acres that had been provided to her late brother, Colebee. After 12 years, her request was granted.

Her petition, written in a fine, flowing hand, reminds the governor that he had given her brother a small grant of land at Black Town. It continues:

"...as her Brother is now dead, your humble Petitioner prays that this grant may be transferred to her and her Children, or that a small portion of the land adjoining may be given to her, whereby she and her Husband may be enabled to feed their Cattle, now Seven in number, earn an honest livelihood, and provide a comfortable home for themselves and their increasing family."

[6] This section draws on Maria Lock's 1831 petition published at Sydney Living Museums, a Biography of Maria Lock by Jack Brook for the Blacktown Native Institution Project, and Maria Lock's entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography 2005.

Recommendations

1. Lived Diversity

Social cohesion happens when we engage with the diversity around us every day. In Blacktown,

people negotiate difference whenever they find it and as a result diversity becomes an essential component of their neighbourhoods. It can present challenges, especially in the early days of a neighbourhood changing, but the lesson of Blacktown is that over time diversity brings out the best in everyone.

2. Recognition of and pride in Indigenous heritage

Blacktown highlights the benefits of recognising an area's Indigenous heritage, embracing the significant foundation it gives to a community's history. Teaching about and fostering pride in that foundation builds resilience and community connections. Leaders need to be able to articulate the strength of that contribution.

3. Harnessing community contributions – strength and resources

Blacktown is home to a multitude of community organisations. They are often started by one person or a few people who aspire to serve a particular group, yet over time many expand their vision to embrace a wider population. The people who drive these organisations, whether paid or volunteer, bring a dynamism to their work that is a vital factor in the strength of multiculturalism and social cohesion in places like Blacktown. But because many of these organisations don't easily fit federal and state government funding models, opportunities to build and embed cohesion may be lost.

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5. Beware the top-down approach

Many service organisations have become the de facto voices of minority communities. As important as the work of these organisations can be, the voices of minority communities need to have multiple channels to communicate and feed back into our systems.

6. No single recipe for local governments, especially as communities change quickly

Governments are continually striving to find the solutions to creating a harmonious community. Blacktown shows us that the answers are within the community itself. The challenge is to continually find ways to bring those voices to the surface, to incorporate them into the knowledge of the Council and to allow them to inform their actions. New arrivals don't stand still; they respond, learn, contribute, influence and change. Our diversity is evolving and our local councils need to evolve with them.

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About the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute exists as a bridge between academic insight and public thought, undertaking research to help Australia advance as a welcoming, prosperous and cohesive nation, particularly where this relates to the transition of migrants into Australian society.

In doing so, the Institute links thought to action to ensure informed debate drives the agenda, and empowers the critical thinking that will help drive Australia's social cohesion forward.

The Applied Research Centre forms a key part of the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, translating research and resources relevant to social cohesion into practical insights.

Through twice-yearly narratives, events, learning programs and considered explanations of research, the Applied Research Centre provides tools, information and innovations that empower individuals and organisations to strengthen cohesion in their communities.

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